



THEIR
GALA
DAYS

LADON H. CLUFF



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THEIR GALA DAYS

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by LAVON H. CLUFF

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DEDICATED TO MELVINA

*Without whose faith, and devoted
assistance this work might never
have been accomplished.*

L. H. C.

CHARACTER SUPREME

*To face defeat and smile; to be
Unmoved in case of victory;
To hold his pose despite the din;
To seek the truth environed in sin;—
Builds character strong, with conscience free.*

—LAVON H. CLUFF

FOREWORD

ESSENTIALLY, this narrative is based on truth. It is the ultimate outcome of a lifelong, not to say, in-born urge to contribute my bit in the defense of a once-berated and much-misunderstood people, of a Saintly creed. Its highlights are directed, in flashes of humble reasoning, toward such worldly factions as have, through lack of understanding, set their God-given talents to work against these Latter-day lovers of Deity, especially through the printed page.

However, it has been my earnest endeavor to, also, entertain. If one possessed clarity of vision; if one had charm in the portrayal of—romance—humor—mystery—tragedy; if, through the understanding of youthful hearts and emotions, one might paint word pictures so clearly, so effectively as to captivate human interest: then perchance, one might, in a measure, cope with certain stories, novels and whatnot which are directed against and are contrary to that great cause which inspired the purpose of this story. In short, it is my desire to impart, beside entertainment, some of the fundamentals of, and, something of the so-called mysteries pertaining to, Mormonism — which many on the outside have always wanted to know.

Lastly, through human-touch characterization, I have herewith attempted to demonstrate how that youth, whether one be of the hasty red-blood type or a humble idealistic dreamer; whether he be city-bred or a simple son of the sod, must be true to himself and his heritage—he must greatly assert his realest self — he must *remain* true to his purpose in the divine calling of life, despite all opposition, if he hopes to achieve success.

It is with feelings of humbleness that I express my gratitude to those who have already accepted this little work with favorable report.

THE AUTHOR.

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THEIR GALA DAYS



Prelude

“**R**EADY . . . Set—Go!”

Tod leaped clear of the starting line. Thrilled. These were mammoth moments. Always he gloried in these annual events. Racing—at holiday time! Always, too, he had come off partially if not wholly victorious. Insofar as concerned the sponsors of these small-town sports, Tod might well have been called a favorite. There were some, however—mostly those of the younger folk—who harbored resentment. Even in this little colony—Garvina. So picturesque and so remote in its intermountain lay, apart from scurvy worldliness! These were they who were jealous. These, for the most part, were his opponents. Duncan Huff, for example, who was almost invariably the runner-up for first place and—first prize. Dunc was he knew—without ever expressing this fact—a very poor sport, not to say a “beef.” Tod could hear him now, close at his elbow . . . pounding—panting—cursing hatefully under his breath. He seemed venomously determined to win this race.

Dunc had a good chance this year, too. A slight tremor waving over him, Tod remembered—this was to be a

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three-quarter-mile run. He slacked his stride a trifle. Ordinarily he was not so much at doing distance. Tod was a sprinter. On the other hand, Dunc was an endurance entry—so surely a one. The latter, thick-chested, hefty, broad of shoulder, yet not short, was perhaps the best mile man in all Chihuahua. Albeit, Tod had launched forth with a will to win. Was he not worthy of this honor and its accompanying reward? He had, verily, practiced, exercised, planned and—yes if you will—importuned Deity for aid, to the end that he might win this and a more important future event.

Tod could see the waiting breathless throng to the fore of him, at the finishing line. He let his gaze fix on that line, which was one literally, draped with prizes. Already he was close enough to make out the largest banner. Blue it was. That was his objective. Again he thrilled. That banner would go to the winner of first place. Better still, five dollars would go with it. How invitingly it waved in the breeze! That banner, for more reasons than one, he wanted desperately to gain.

Now, from the tail of his eye, could be seen his opponent . . . creeping up on him—gaining . . . nearly abreast of him Dunc was. Tod felt somewhat to weaken. Was this to be another of those occasions upon which he would lead off for the usual short distance and then fall back from sheer lack of breath? Endurance? No—hopefully. He had fortified himself against that. Tod lengthened his strides. He, at that, seemed to lag. Still, he had something in reserve. Always, he had kept in strict accord with the

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ethical laws of nature, inculcating clean, temperate, upright living. So now, despite his slight build, his shallow chest, his not outstanding muscles, he felt himself equal to the occasion—by virtue of his wholesome young manhood there surged over him, now, the spiritual quieting conviction that he should and would endure to a favorable finish.

Thereupon, teeth set, he forged forward with even greater speed. Never before had he shown so much speed at this juncture. He felt the stretch and strain of sinewy muscles. His breath seemed fairly to burst from him—in panting gasps. Yet he was not failing . . . was he? . . .

No! For now, gradually, strenuously . . . he once more struggled away from his opponent, leaving Dunc behind. Another quarter of a mile he held that long, swift, wonderful stride. And then—his lithe yet laboring form trudged under the banner-strewn rope, the finishing line, to reach up and . . . jerk down his long-hoped-for prize! After which momentous achievement, Tod sensed more than saw his friends clustering about him, slapping his shoulder, cheering him, hilariously proclaiming him the winner of that main event!

But there were those who did not thrill to that race, one in particular.

Later a voice, harsh, cold, spiteful, close behind him, said, "Tod, you—cheat. Here's where you get the works!"

Tod wheeled to confront his chiefest adversary. "Dunc, what do you mean?"

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Huff took a long stride toward Tod. "Ah-h-h—" bitingly. "You d—— well know what I mean."

That said, he turned to his inglorious pals, who skulked close behind him. Disciples of the devil were they.

The bully's voice rang out with the invective — "You guys all saw what he done!"

The answer came unanimously not in the negative.

"Yeah, Dunc! We saw him bust you alright."

"Heah thet? I got plenty proof you done for me. Put me outa commission. 'Cause you knew I was passin' you up."

Tod's first look had been that of blank amaze. At this last lying shot from the enemy a rush of righteous rage swept over him. But, true to character, he quelled his emotions. Before the so-rude interruption he had quit the crowd, rounded a corner off the main street, and was heading homeward. Just now, sensing violence, he looked about him. No one showed. Worse still, shadows were dusking the settlement.

"Har! Har!" guffawed Huff, the bully. "We've got you dead to rights. Yo're alone, an' scared. No use yap-pin' for help out here, neither."

Thoughts swirled through Tod's brain. . . . Now he recalled a singular something.

"Dunc Huff," he said, evenly, "I don't know what's your play. But whatever it is, it's uncalled for and down-right rotten of you and your clique. Now, you know I barely brushed you in that race. If anything, you crowded

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me. You didn't have to try and pass so close to me. You're mad, Dunc. Mad!"

Huff snarled. "Yo're claimin' you didn't jab me in the stomach with your elbow, then? Knockin' the breath outa me!"

"Exactly. Now go ahead and do your dirtiest if you—"

This last remark of Tod's was never finished.

Goaded to action by jealousy and hot hatred, all at once they rushed him, "ganged him"! Tod was felled to earth beneath stomping feet—ruthless bodies—and flying, flailing fists . . .

The very last thing the youthful unhappy recipient of this hateful outrage remembered . . . a dimming vision of a lovely girlish figure bending over him, whose faultless face was smiling down at him, and whose invincible spirit had scorned his besiegers off. And away.

Ground Cherries

IT WAS ground cherry time in Garvina, wild fruit time; that season prevalent when the budding beauty of spring and midsummer gives way to the more mature sweetness of the summer's passing. Gardens showed green-gold. Bottle-stoppers, bluebells, redbells, mingled with here, here and there exceedingly bright whitestars, which delicately spangled the meadows. A faintest breeze, fanning his cheek, sighed across the pasture lands, rustling the high wild hay in undulatory motion, reminding Tod that it would soon be ready for mowing. Yet, best of all, the ground cherries were ripe and ready to gather. His mouth watered. That would mean some of the elegantly-sweet, mother-made, ground cherry preserves.

Swinging a goodly-sized pail, the while he whistled a merry tune, Tod "cut through" the meadows, approaching the lower field. Another reason for his merriment—four clinking big "pasos" in the pocket of his "jeans." One had been lost or stolen in last evening's struggle. But Tod, as ever, was inclined to see the bright side. He still had four dollars, thanks to some strange party of the fairer sex who had interposed in his behalf.

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Tod wondered to whom he was indebted for that favorable turn of events. Recognition of her had dawned not upon him. The indignant pose of her had been superb! Thought of it brought a spreading smile to the youth's comely face, a smile that crinkled the corners of his mouth and crept characteristically to the tips of his ears. Tod could still see the fiery ethical look of her as she had stormed his besiegers with "Amscray! You scamps. The nerve of you. A whole hellish mob on one boy!" Tod concluded that she was a stranger in the settlement. And a stranger, a newcomer in Garvina was a creature rare indeed. At any event she had saved the day for him. Otherwise things might have been much worse. He might have been beaten, badly. Dunc's gang might have taken all his money.

Tod looked down at his shabby "taywees." He thought, too, of the cold wintry days when he had gone barefooted to school. There had been snowy days when he had had to run to the nearest neighbors, warm his feet, run another stretch, warm again, and so on until the schoolhouse was reached. Tod was fatherless, also brotherless. His people seldom saw cash. They raised that they ate. And their clothes, for the most part, were homemade. How often it had been necessary for Tod to sneak in and out of Sunday services in order to hide, as best he might, the telltale patch in the seat of his trousers, a colored shirt, or some pair of native shabby shoes. But now, with a thrill he reminded himself, due to the prize money he had won in yesterday's race, he could appear in public decently shod.

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And yet . . . remembrance shot a pang through him—what of that far-overdue balance of mortgage which hung like a blight over their otherwise humble "homey" little cottage.

Tod well remembered the squat, bloaty-faced individual with the overstuffed front and a smelly cigar lolling on his lower lip when he had looked bleary-eyed at Tod's morbid little mother and had threatened her with "I'll sell you out if you don't meet your payments promptly!" Tod had been only eight then. And his mother had been a widow for two years. How they had struggled the next eight years to keep a roof over their heads! Surely their creditor, old man Maston, would not crowd them for the final payment, since they had thus proven themselves. Anyway, his much-needed four dollars would scarcely pay the interest. Besides—that great event of July the twenty-fourth would soon roll around. Had he not won the foot race of yesterday's celebration? Might not the same good fortune attend him when mounted on his pinto racer? There was scant likelihood of his losing the horse race, in view of his paint pony being faster than the horse he had ridden on the twenty-fourth, of July last. And there would be enough prize money awarded the winner of that race to more than pay off the balance of the mortgage, and thereby relieve his poor little mother of her chiefest worry.

Thus the lighthearted Tod tried to reason away forever any grim concern he might have for their unpaid debt. Thus he permitted himself to resume his more pleasant conjecturing.

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Those long-dreamed-of books! A copy of *Gospel Doctrine* he must have. *Church History* and two or three volumes by Bane Gray he certainly needed. But would there be enough money to buy these books, including the price of shoes? Excluding the few booklets sent to him in childhood by his grandparents from the States, the *Bible* was perhaps the only book Tod had ever owned. He, however, had borrowed other books, and had read them. As a matter of singular fact, although he had no library, Tod was a lover of books, and, to a great extent, was a self-educated youth.

Straddling the barbed wire fence to enter the lower meadow he trudged along the rugged ditchbank which led to the creek. The sun reigned well on high and the day was growing hot. It would be cooler on the lower side where the running stream with its overhanging willows bordered the meadow.

Tod soon reached his objective, a spot where ground cherry vines adorned the creek bank. Clear and cool beneath him the creek stream rippled. It murmured music on his drums. A school of trout caught his eye. But as Tod was not prepared for angling he was content to watch the fish in their gala gliding here and there along the sparkling stream.

Nearby two mated members of the sweet feathery folk ceased for a brief while their birdie tasks. They topped the highest willow and, from this point of vantage, twittered noisily, as though to chide him for the, what they

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deemed, intrusion. Tod was wont to linger briefly, to watch, to bask, to revere—to dream.

But, presently, he sought out a great green vine close at hand. He dropped down beside it. He placed his pail at a convenient nearness. Then, still cheerfully whistling, he rolled the vine and began his own pleasant business of gathering those berries—so round and ripe and opal-like before him.

Ensued some moments of this whistling away at his work. Of a sudden, however, his happy reflections were interrupted. A slight rustling in the willows . . . to the fore of him it was. Tod's interest quickened to that direction. At first he saw nothing . . . save a significant movement of the willow tops . . . growing ever closer. He tensed. He wondered if that bad bunch had waylaid him again. Tod half expected to see his adversary burst from the thicket, to pounce down upon him backed and bolstered by his hell-bent pals. . . .

But the next instant the willows parted, revealing instead, the rare creature in question—Tod's rescuer. . . . She was, indeed—a creature fair *and* rare.

Tod was peering over the half-raised vine at her. Impulsive start of apprehension had placed him in this attitude, as if he would thus shield himself from impending doom. But now he stared out of sheer admiration for the approaching young lady. And, as he gazed, Tod told himself that he had never before seen a more flawless face, its contour ovaled, its features cameo-like; with sloe, velvety

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hair and eyes contrasting so strikingly against her fairness. Lilting eyes they were. And yet . . . somehow wistful—almost sad in the soft light of their expression—unfathomable as the deep at dark night.

Then she espied him.

Pattering to a halt perhaps a half dozen paces before him, she glimpsed only his great eyes—great and wide and blue were his, peering under a straw hatbrim over the vine at her, and she divined the rest.

"Oh—it's you," she exclaimed. "Hell-o."

"Aw—" wonderingly, half shyly. He got to his feet, stammered, "are you the—one—?"

Smilingly, intriguingly, she said, "I am, I hope."

"But—how did you happen along at just the right time? And how—"

Again she interposed. "Me? Oh, I'm the best little browser. Just now, I heard you whistling.

"Tell me—how can you be so cheery? When only yesterday you were the victim of a most cowardly outrage? In fancy I had pictured the victim at a later hour pacing the floor, tearing at his hair, roarously proclaiming the undying wrath of him so luckless, scourged, downtrodden. But, lo—the very next morning here I find you, whistling, as though you were wholly at peace with the world."

"Pshaw. That wouldn't help matters," with sincere directness Tod returned. "That'd only be misfired passion."

A moment of uncertain silence the girl looked in puzzlement at him.

"Oh—I see." She spoke admiringly but she was still

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somewhat baffled. The youth had seemed so unimpressed by her eloquence that she felt to remark, "I trust you won't think me snoopy?"

"Shucks. Why should I? But," he added, "you're quite a mystery, Miss. The way you happen to be in the right place at the right time."

"A mystery—ah—that's it," she gingerly said. "I can see it across the printed page, in huge letters—**A MYSTERIOUS MISS WRIGHT ALWAYS FOUND IN RIGHT PLACE WITH THE RIGHT PARTY AT THE RIGHT TIME!**"

Quietly Tod lowered his eyes. "You're making fun of me," he said, simply.

"No—really I'm not. You see—" her tones waxed weighty now as she went on—"I suppose all journalists, all writers are more or less mysterious . . . even to themselves," she annexed with no small hint of irony.

Tod's face suddenly kindled with ardent interest. "Writers—journalist—are you a writer?"

"Why, yes. What of it?"

"Gosh! Sometimes I've wondered if I'd ever see one, let alone be—" his lips clamped suddenly tight on further utterance.

She, laughingly, said, "Writers have a strange way of prying and spying around into other people's business. That's how I chanced to hear those ruffians plotting against you yesterday." As though she would put him at ease—he socially, herself literally—she came over and sat down on a pole quite close to him, the while she was saying,

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"That also accounts for my coming upon you at present—
young enthusiast out for material—hears unusually buoyant whistling—conceives idea of investigating its source. And so—well, here I am."

"You mean you just want to study me? Like you would a tree, a brook, a bird or any of God's creatures, merely from a writer's point of view?"

Color mounted in the young lady's cheeks, marring the whiteness of her face. As though she would conceal some of it a soft hand lifted to her face. Presumably she had laid a trap for herself.

"Oh, no." She hastened to explain, as though she were anxious to base this whole interview on her sincerity, her offer of friendship. "I didn't mean that. I mean, your people—this little settlement nestling here, on the very crest of the mountains. I'm so much interested. Purely from the standpoint of admiration," she prevaricated. "I want to know all about things and—your people. I thought perhaps you might help me. I should like, muchly, to make a friend of you. That is, if you care to know me?"

Tod said simply, "I don't quite understand. I'm more than grateful for what you did for me last night. But why did you hurry away before I had even a chance to thank you?"

"Another failing of the writer." She told him, in that same vein of mystery: "They seldom, if ever, do what one expects."

"But how come you to be in Garvina at all?"

"A friend of mine told me interesting things about your

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people. I've heard you live rather — different here. That your customs, your faith, your creed is extraordinarily so. And, of course, being a writer and somewhat resourceful myself, it was not so unnatural that I should want to gain first-hand information."

"When did you get in town?"

"Day before yesterday evening. I needn't tell you how." She smiled meaningly. "I suppose that jolty, jerky, mail-carrying hack is about the only scheduled means of transportation you have in these fastnesses. I suppose, too, that you know already I'm staying at Bishop Weston's, perhaps the only lodging house in town. I came from California. My real name is Cula Payne.

"Come now—it's time I learned something about *you*," she said in her most winsome tones. "Don't you think?"

"Sure, that won't take long, Miss. I'm just plain me. Not a mite important. Live in yonder humble cottage. And Tod Speckles is a name that's neither famous nor fancy."

She laughed mirthlessly. "Now that is a name to be called." She took stock of his simple attire, his Mexican "taywees," straw hat and the homemade shirt that was half concealed by the up-flung front of his blue demin overalls. "I recall that many of our great presidents were once plain country boys. Why, you've all the earmarks of a great man in the making, even to the usual spiteful enemy. Tod Speckles, the unassuming, steady, brave, light-hearted, admired by the old and envied by the young folk."

"Pshaw." Tod stayed his stand. "You don't mean that.

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You're making fun of me again," he said. Then stood quietly by, apparently unaffected.

A moment she studied him. More and more this quiet, unassuming lad of the sod was making himself felt with her, and the strangeness of it was that he was not in the least trying to. She pondered this fact. There was that in this boy's make-up which made him appear not too boyish yet which gave one the impression that he *was* young in years—a certain intellectuality of a more mature man, which his mild ways and homely garb could neither repel nor cover up. Perhaps it was his very sincerity, honesty, modesty . . . perhaps his spiritual eyes—most certainly they were the biggest, clearest, bluest eyes she had ever met with her own inscrutable gaze. Surely, too, they were suggestive of an inner strength back of them—something eminent, extraordinary, serene. What mostly puzzled her was his unassuming blandness. Or, was he unassuming by nature? She was inclined to believe that he was. This boy's quiet simplicity seemed an outstanding virtue of his.

"May I ask, do you like living here, your present environment and all?"

"It's home to me," he replied, readily enough.

"And you never want to leave; you wish to remain in so small a place always?"

He returned: "It's not where a body lives that really matters."

"Matters? Oh, of course not. I see—it's how one lives," came her rejoinder, her amendment.

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Next she tried to trick him with "So then you're happily contented with life just as you have it here?"

"That'd be telling, wouldn't it? I dare say our existence in the settlement here is not so dull as you might think. We have some real good get-together times, socials I mean."

"Well, you certainly had a hearty celebration yesterday. Everyone seemed to be so in harmony with everyone else, excepting, of course, the gang that assailed *you*. Are they of your creed?"

"No. Most of them are outsiders."

"You mean non-Mormons?"

He nodded. "And," he assured her, "it's a certainty—none of them are in harmony with Mormonism."

She studied him again, thoughtfully.

"There's one thing obvious about you," she at length stated, "your people—they are not typical of the back-woodsmen. And you personally are quite different, more cultured, more refined, so seemingly peaceful. Have you schooling?"

"I've been through the grades is all. I like to read."

"Really. Then perhaps you are *well* read, well informed. And we'll assume—that makes you popular among your townsmen, which gives you a sense of satisfaction amounting to content."

Not without emphasis Tod returned, "Miss, I doubt if popularity brings peace."

"So. That is why you have no desire to travel, see the

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world, learn things, make fortunes and become famous? Popular?"

Again his interest quickened. Sitting down cross-legged before her, he pushed back his straw hatbrim, revealing for the first time the russet-brown flecks about his nose and comely crinkles beneath his eyes. Flecks that one always looked at twice upon meeting him, yet about which one could never quite be sure whether they added to or detracted from his comeliness. Tod met and matched the girl's gaze. And, for the first time since she had come upon him did he seem wholeheartedly communicative.

"To my way of thinking, the same goes for travel, learning and riches, too, Miss; they don't exactly bring lasting happiness. For happiness, like heaven, is mostly in a body's heart. And it's my belief — it's not so much what we take in, much learning, much sightseeing that builds character. It's mostly what we give out in service to others. True, life is a lesson to be learned. But the most valuable lessons in life are learned by doing things—for others. That would be living with a purpose. Contrary to this, though, it sometimes seems like half the world is madly at war against the other half, crowding, pushing, trampling, trying more and more to learn how to best beat the other fellow, cheat their fellowmen."

He paused, fairly overwhelmed by the intensity of his own mood.

"Yes, yes; again we agree. Please go on," she entreated.

Like as one will, when in the security of his own back yard, assume more the affirmative; so Tod felt at home on

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this subject, and, after a little silence, went on with a fervor that stirred his listener to unplumbed depths:

"Too many people, I believe, have no aim in life. There's folks who try by every hitch and snitch to gain happiness unto themselves and, failing, they become so warped and twisted in spirit, they don't care a hang what becomes of their wretched selves finally. So they just drift hopelessly, haplessly on, and on."

Another silence!

At length he rose saying, "Shucks. This is untimely though. Me preaching on a week day and you, as a writer, knowing more about these things than me."

"That's what *you* think." Then she sighed deeply. It were as if her soul was sad with wanting. Wanting . . . she knew not what, save it were a grave monition of that which might have been. "As a matter of plain fact," she confided, "I think I might be classified among those aimless ones of whom you speak. *Living with a purpose!* That is a beautiful thought on the philosophy of life. Tell me, Tod," she asked, in all sincerity, "what do you esteem a worthy purpose one might have in life?"

"Aw—there's so many worthy things to be done. Need we wonder?"

"But," she averred, "you'd be surprised how many of those aimless, hapless souls are drifting inevitably. All are not willfully bad. Many have failed to find their realest, truest selves."

And there was in her voice that which made his heart warm to the girl.

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"Sure. But they should look deep inside themselves and be sure what they most want to do that's worthwhile in life, and then be true to themselves by doing it. Perseveringly. Take yourself now, you're a writer. Why? Because that's the thing you most want to be. I've read that any honorable purpose becomes great when greatly pursued. But I don't think we should waste precious time trying to excel at something we're not cut out for. And, when we've decided on the thing we most want to do, we should consider why it's best to do it. In your case, no doubt you write thinking not only of wealth and fame and personal gain, but also with earnest desire to instruct, inform, entertain, uplift. That would be *writing* with a purpose."

Quite thoughtfully, she said, "Assuming that you are correct in your diagnosis of my case, what would you prescribe for me if I should tell you I was still suffering because of lack of wisdom in the proper application of the remedy? After all, you must know there are many branches to the writing game. I have tried a number. Have partially succeeded at several. But have excelled in none. And I am very much in darkness as to which I am best suited. I am not even sure what I most want to be, a poet, journalist, novelist, song writer, play writer—whether or not I should write verse or prose."

"That's funny," ejaculated he.

"Funny?"

"Miss, what I really meant," he altered, "it's strange. Us both wanting to write is coincidental. It's strange that you have the ability without a definite aim, while I have a

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purpose, a special reason for wanting to write—I know just what I want to write and why I want to write it. But I haven't the ability, yet."

"W-h-a-t! You — too? . . . Still, why not? Heavens knows you sound like a book. Or a preacher. What do you mean you have no ability?"

"I've had no technical training, no instruction in that field. The truth is," he frankly told her, "I'm kept so busy about the place, striving to make a mere living, that, so far, I've had no opportunity, not even to practice writing."

"But, you seem to know so much about life. *That*, after all, is most important."

He rejoined: "To know life would be a good background. Still, I fancy one must know the essentials about plotting, characterization, sentence, theme, paragraph and the composition or narrative as a whole."

She looked her amaze. He was growing more eloquent the while.

"Don't you grow restless, discouraged, awfully blue at times when you feel the strong urge to actually get started at your chosen work?" she questioned, still deeply interested.

"I grow much concerned. But I don't feel to despair, as long as I am doing my best to do my bit each day."

She looked at him questioningly. Then said, "Well, it's beyond me. What, may I ask, is your noble purpose back of it all? Please tell me what you would write about if you had, what you term—ability?"

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For some while he sat unmoving, wordless.

She, watching, said, "I trust my entreaty was not overmuch personal. If it's something—a secret you do not wish to disclose, then I am sorry. And you needn't heed my inquiry."

At last he spoke. And the young lady, listening, thrilled. For his great blue eyes were somehow infinitely lighted with the glow of his inspiration. "It's no secret," he was saying, "It's only that you have touched the biggest thing in my life—my religion. My life's dream of dreams has been to hit back at a certain novelist and philosopher through the printed page—meet him on his own grounds and refute his insulting, theorizing remarks about my people, our church. Said writer is one of the most popular of all our contemporaries. And in his every volume is to be found what is meant to be a blight upon the faith of a God-fearing people.

"But, look!" he called, this time determined to change the subject. "I sure like ground cherries!" With that, he seized the great green vine and flung it back to reveal one of God's fruitful gifts to mankind.

Eyes widening, the girl exclaimed her amazement. "Oh—what a lovely luscious sight! What did you call them?"

"Ground cherries."

Upon meeting the girl, Tod had let the vine fall back to its natural spreading lay inside the back-furrow; where, accordingly, after the nature of its particular species, the

THEIR *GALA* DAYS

dense foliage had, thus far, kept the many and clustered berries hidden from sight underneath.

Tod was saying "Yep. If you are willing to accept me as your future guide in this strange land of putative strange things and people, you may as well begin following my lead now, by filling your mouth plumb full of these juicy favorites, and pressing them between your teeth, in order to acquaint your palate with their delicious flavor. Come on. I can back you out." So jesting, he quickly gathered a double handful of the choicest cleanest ones, divided with her, and then proceeded to press his dare by gulping his half of them at once. And lo—if Tod had supposed her not game, he most certainly received a surprise. For surely, gleefully, unhesitatingly his companion followed suit. She crammed, poked, squeezed the berries into her mouth until she could scarcely close her teeth. Then to the humorous rhythmical jerking of her head, she tried to chew. Ensued a gurgling—gulping—giggling, while the juice ran down their chins. . . .

After a last final gulp and swallowing hard, Tod laughingly offered her a large bandanna as blue as the juice it was meant to mop. And she laughingly accepted.

"There. Now what do you think of me?" she gasped, still applying the kerchief.

"I think you're swell." And he meant it. He was thinking that despite this girl's beauty, delicacy, education, wealth no doubt, and her immaculately groomed person, totally, she was still delightfully human. "A darn good sport"—only a bit pampered, spoiled.

GROUND CHERRIES

Thus he had abruptly switched the interview to a lighter vein. Thus he had turned the tables on her. Thus she had responded readily to his spirit, partly because there was not much else she could do, gracefully. Thus, there-upon, they continued to laugh and chat merrily, the while they picked more and more ground cherries to fill his bucket. Nor did they refrain from filling their mouths yet, now and then.

"Good grief," she retorted, still mindful of his gala statement. "I *will* be *swell* if I keep eating—what did you call them? . . . ground cherries."

"Like them?"

"Do I! Muchly. I think I never ate better berries."

"Wait 'till you taste some of the ground cherry preserves mom makes."

"I'd jump at the chance."

"Miss, that's a promise," said he, by way of invitation.

Soft velvet eyes smiled up at him. Ruby lips curled in pouting appeal.

"Don't you think I have earned the honor—won't you call me—Cula?"

"Sure, Miss, Cula. I'll try to remember it."

Cula demurred.

He said amusedly: "Let me see . . . what was that last name?"

"Payne."

"Oh—yes, Payne. Now that's too bad," he crooned, intriguingly.

"Too bad?"

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"Yes."

"Why?"

"Sure you must feel terrible."

"Why terrible?"

"'Cause. *Payne*," he emphasized meaningly, "that sounds much like an ailment to me." Then: "Gosh—it's almost noon. I better hurry and get these up to the house. Mom will be waiting for them." This said, he set to work in earnest, both hands hastily plucking berries.

While the girl, watching, suffered now in very deed, from the folly of her own frivolous designs. She thought, too, that she had never seen such nimble, swiftly-moving fingers at work.

"My word!" she presently exclaimed. "Your fingers move among the leaves like magic."

"It's what we call 'huntin' the little black-heads'," he explained.

"But it doesn't seem possible the way you—"

"All you've got to do is — just pick ground cherries — and work."

"I see," meaningly. "But it still looks artful to me—the way you show me up."

"Pshaw. Anyone can do it. The knack is, don't let one hand know what the other hand is doing. Just takes time and a little practice."

"Uhuh." She nodded significantly. "I fancy so. Strikes me you do a lot of things well. So modestly well! Now, I won't press the subject too far because I see you are crowded for time. But sometime you must tell me more

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about yourself and your plans for the future. Just now, I'm entreating you to tell me one more thing before we part."

"Lady," he said, gallantly, "if it's in my power and principle to do so, I sure will."

"Tell me, then, who is the luckless author upon whom you choose to work retribution?"

Tod sat thoughtfully silent a second. Then said, "I don't see why not. Sure I don't want to do him wrong. I have no desire to kill what Bane Gray is or has done, except, in all sincerity and humility, I might offer him something greater in return."

"*Bane Gray!*" Of a sudden the girl caught her breath in surprise. Dismay. . . . And then sat staring, stilled. It were as if she had just received a mortal hurt.

"Why, Miss Payne—Cula—! What's the matter? I had a feeling not to talk more about it. Maybe you know the man. He might even be a friend—"

"Oh, no!" she quickly recovered. "It's just that he is so—great a writer. Or, shall we say—popular?"

Cula's Qualms

MANIFESTLY, from her first interview with the young man of the sod, Cula Payne gained at least one thing — food for thought. That same evening long after the sunset hour, she found herself pacing to and fro under the shadowy mountain, beside the creek stream, while the stars watched. The Bishop's wife, her landlady, had warned her not to stroll far after dark, since "many wild and vicious beasts prowl close to the settlement on every side." This night, however, the girl was obsessed more with dread of something nameless, unearthly, than with fear of any living menace. To think that she had come to these rugged and far-distant Sierras on her strange quest only to become disillusioned, disconcerted if not entirely disheartened less than three days after her arrival.

"These people?"

She had been told that they were of a cult given to fanaticism—a narrow, clannish, ruthless, misguided people. On the contrary, her first sample of this ill-reputed country folk had proven anything but narrow. Tod was broadminded, brilliant, shrewd. Never had she met a more level-headed, serene-spirited, straighter-backed speci-

CULA'S QUALMS

man of young manhood. And she, recalling the scripture, quoted—"By their fruits ye shall know them." Surely his religious sect could not be too perfectly awful and produce such fruits. She pondered again his source of spiritual tranquility, of fortitude. And, to think that she had tried to mislead him, trick him, toy with him. Cula chided herself for an imprudent little imp. Was it not she who was perfectly awful?

She harbored, besides, indignation and something akin to disdain. For the first time in her life she had been outwitted, baffled and belittled by a young man. She—Cula Payne—a most beautiful heiress—the girl with perhaps a score of suitors prattling after her. Had met a man who had beaten her at her own game! That strange, quiet, simple-hearted boy had put her at her wit's end. Showed her the error of her way . . . then had left her in a panorama of bewilderment.

Cula fought mentally. Spiritually. She suffered in her pride. Again and again she strove to analyze her emotions. After all, did it matter what he thought of her? And once more she admitted to her deepest, truest self that she wanted him to think well of her. Somehow he was vastly different from all the giddy, gabby young men she heretofore had known. Unlike the others he had that intellectual strength and unusual pride, will power and an individuality that had awakened within her a . . . a personal interest, at length she was forced to admit.

As far back as she could remember, Cula, in the deepest precincts of her soul, had been vaguely conscious of an im-

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ponderable longing—yearning—for a different existence. Born, as it were, with a silver spoon in her mouth, she had lived years of uselessness; the while she had sensed a deprivation, not of material things. She yearned for soul gratification, for achievement, spiritual development, which should have been hers by divine right, yet which, because of her environment, had been deprived her.

"That's just it," she murmured. "My every little whim has been gratified."

Face to face with these grim facts, it occurred to her that in her day-dreaming of life, a man like this clean-cut, serious-minded youth had always been associated with her lofty aspirations.

Then, as she again rehearsed her indiscreet conduct toward him, she was obsessed with scrupulous, bitter misgivings. To think that she had met him who, to her, was a man in a million, only to make herself conspicuous—quite ridiculous in the eyes of that party.

All because she had meant to deduce and broadcast through the printed page the peculiarities of this ill-famed people—feather her cap at their expense.

Cula sighed her regret. Repairing to a dead and fallen log, she sat down, where stately pines reared above her. Her eyes lifting, she gazed on high. For long she sat thus, motionless, watching the cloudships sail the blue. On little rifts of glory now they veiled the moon, or sailed in shadowy mysticism over the jagged peaks. Night birds called. Locusts hummed. Starlight filtered through the overhanging boughs. All these whispered peace while, gradu-

CULA'S QUALMS

ally, the girl's swirling thoughts succumbed to the low mellow murmur of the running stream. So it was that it occurred to her, irrevocably—she divined that the youth in question—son of the mountain sod—was, philosophically speaking, closer to the clouds than she.

Ensued, yet, moments that were not serene—moments of pervading melancholy when that name, Bane Gray, for perhaps the thousandth time since Tod had made his appalling revelation, returned to her, persisted with her. It was a bane and a curse to her indeed! Perhaps that alone was responsible for her momentary peace being broken. Perhaps, too, it was the mournful wail of a lone coyote, sounding from afar. Or, perhaps—a loosened stone . . . now clattering down from somewhere up along the trail which returned to her that nameless dread. Shivered her very soul! Whatever it was, it also, now, caused her to rise suddenly, as though she would quell forever disquieting thoughts. Then she bent her steps toward, murmuring "Ah! I suppose I'm about the most wretched little misfit in the whole wide—"

Cula stopped short.

Movement of a shadow close among the trees gave her a start of apprehension. Of fear! Breathless, stiff and still she waited, watching . . .

Presently the shadow disengaged itself from others on the hillside. And Cula beheld the burly form of Duncan Huff, leading down the trail toward her . . .

To the girl standing there alone in that dark and distant

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spot, it seemed that he came up significantly, frightfully close to her before he burped, "So here you are!"

Slender fingers fluttered up to the little depression in Cula's throat, betraying her nervousness. The girl had felt to flee. But even as a snake has the power to charm at times and prey upon less subtile creatures, so he seemed to possess a certain ominous something about him which held her rooted to the spot, immobile.

"What are you—doing—down here," she stammered, when finally she gained her tongue.

He glared at her sneeringly. "I might ast you thet same?" He wasted no time with preliminaries. "Set back down on thet log," he said, pointing.

Fear in Cula's breast augmented. But she only tossed her head the higher.

"Si—down!" Stentoriously.

A righteous rush of wrathful indignation, at this, sustained her. "Mr. Huff," she tersely said, "by what right do you propose to command me?"

"By right of might, if you don't be nice to me—as nice as you've been to Tod Speckles," he lustily hissed. "I allus reckoned thet milksop strippin' had somethin' shady under cover of his smooth manners and high-falootin' talk. An' now today, when I drove the cows down yonder to pasture—" the jerk of his head indicated the grassy flat across the creek from Tod's ground cherry patch—"I saw you makin' up to him. An' him alikin' it. So, will ya sit down *now* an' talk it over? Or, shall I tell the Bishop, right away, all I'm hankerin' to?"

CULA'S QUALMS

"Suppose I choose to ignore you? By leaving—now!" She stamped a foot in perturbation. "Suppose I let you spread your lies?"

"You daresn't."

"No! Why?"

"'Cause I'll force you down soon an' hard," he harshly threatened.

She told him "Well, it so happens that I want very much to say a few things to you, too." With that, she went back and sat down. Pertinaciously.

"Now, be shore to tell me the truth," he barked. "Ya was playin' up to Tod, wasn't ya?"

"No!" she half screamed, black eyes blazing.

"Then what kept ya in the willows so long—you aknowin' him only these two or three days? Answer me that."

Cula bristled. "Of course *you* wouldn't, couldn't understand. A fellow of your stripe! But here is the truth: Tod and I have something in common. Our ideas, our likes, our aspirations—"

"Har! Har! Somethin' in common, eh? Thet's good."

And then, much to his surprise and chagrin, she slapped his mouth, not hard, nor yet lightly. And she made as if to scratch his eyes out.

"Why you — gal, are you a she wild-cat! Thet you should fly at me like that?" Albeit, he seemed, after that, more willing to talk to her in a milder manner. Accept her as she chose to be. Nor was he anxious to rouse in her again that other characteristic.

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"What you infer," she was gallantly telling him, "is preposterous, vile, and downright beastly of you! And I fancy Tod would take such talk as an insult, too," she flung at him.

The bully glared hard into her face, meaning to detect any hint of faltering or of untruth.

While he looked she further said, "Not that I would hesitate to be nice to Tod Speckles, in a decent way. For I believe *him* to be a gentleman, whose name and character, like my own, are above reproach."

Presumably, what Huff read in the girl's eyes attested to her speech. For he said, half grudgingly, "Yeah. Well, becuse yo're a gal I'm lettin' things ride as they set. An' as long as you ain't payin' no special favors to Tod, I'll treat ya like a lady. But I'm warnin' ya, don'tcha hand me the high-brow, then go hangin' around thet bean pole!"

"C'mon. I'll git ya home."

Aunt Wealthy —A Remarkable Soul

THE hour was still early dawn when a hasty rap-rap sounded on the door of the humble little cottage by the creek.

Tod, in the act of kindling a fire in the huge old range, let a pitch chunk slide from his fingers to the open grate, forthwith turning to the door.

"It's only me, Tod, boy. How've you been?" In a twinkling, true to type, she was in and across the room, talking a streak as she went. "Where's your mother? Oh, here you are, Sister Speckles. Don't move! It's only me, Aunt Wealthy. And just you stay right in bed." Then in her most winsome tones — "Good morning, dear. How are you?"

Tod's mother managed a warm "Good morning, Aunt Wealthy."

"Do you know," Aunt Wealthy went on, and on, "Vick just got back from his trip to the valley. And he hauled up a whole load of flour. Traded in some yearlings. I told him *he* sure must be tired of corndodger — bringing back a big load of flour with not much else. Worse still,

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he turns to me and says 'I know where I'll get rid of some of it.' Then he unloads enough on me to last a lifetime. And meat — say, the folks beefed a critter yesterday too. And you'd think I was a carnivorous monster, the amount of beef they forced onto me. So, well, I've got to get back. Take good care of yourself, dear."

As she scurried away through the kitchen, Aunt Wealthy winked back over her shoulder at Tod. "What I especially came for, young man," she told him, "was to invite you over. I've got something *mighty* important I wish to say to *you*. Privately. Goodbye."

Tod was replacing the lids on a stove full of roaring pitch and cedar blaze. He almost dropped the last one in his eagerness to catch up with her.

"Wait a minute, Aunt Wealthy! What's it all about?"

"Ah-h—you'll find out."

"When? How soon do you want—"

"As early as you like," she interposed, scurrying on.

"But, wait," he called after her. "Aunt Wealthy—you're forgetting something!"

The wave of his hand indicated the sack of flour and a goodly cut of beef on the steps quite close to the rear door.

"Oh, that," she returned. "Well, I had to get rid of it somehow. So, if you don't know what else to do with it, just—feed it to the pigs! . . ."

His eyes a bit moist, Tod stooped down and took up the great woman's offering. He well knew how hard a time the giver would have getting rid of any food products. She was not so rich herself; not in worldly goods. But in

AUNT WEALTHY—A REMARKABLE SOUL

spirit, in health, in talent—in character and disposition she was all that her name implied.

Tod was thinking, too, of how good some real white bread would taste for a change. Moreover, his mother was direly in need of a change of food.

Whereupon, as soon as the morning chores were completed, Tod and his mother partook, gratefully, of the fresh and not unpalatable food thus, providentially, supplied; after which Tod donned his Mexican straw. Anxious to comply with Aunt Wealthy's bidding, he stepped out into the crisp morning air.

"My dear boy, how often I have said—you don't have to knock when you come to Aunt Wealthy's and find the door unlocked. Come right in."

This was her way of making him feel welcome.

And Tod never entered here that he did not recall the past pleasurable hours which this gentlewoman's home had afforded him.

Aunt Wealthy had lost her husband shortly after coming to the little colony, Mr. Shepherd having been killed by rebel bandits, which roved in bands from time to time across this mountainous country. Thus widowed, she had taken up quarters with her sister's family, the Burtons. She had insisted that a small room with them was sufficient for her small needs. Yet, with sterling characteristics, talented service, unwavering purpose and a disposition toward loving kindness, she had warmed her way into the hearts of the country folk, until Bishop Weston,

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voicing the unanimous opinion of the settlement, had said: "She's tutor, teacher, doctor, nursemaid and Godmother to nearly every youngster in town, not to mention her as a social leader and whatnot among we oldsters. Why, the least we can do to show our gratitude toward *Aunt Wealthy* is to—unite our efforts and build her a home of her own."

And so, it was the Bishop who had furnished the lumber. It was the young men of the community who had cleared the lot. It was the entire country folk who had willingly built the house. But the splendid woman herself must be given the credit for filling the little cottage so brimming full of cheer and good will, wherefore making it perhaps the most popular place in town.

So, thereafter, the name had stuck. She was aunt to all. And who can gainsay that this noble, talented, neighborly woman, though she had no sons and daughters of her own, was a *wealthy* one indeed!

"Tod, my boy," she was saying, "why didn't you come to your Aunt Wealthy sooner? I could have helped you—in your trouble."

"Trouble, Auntie?"

She said, smilingly, "Yes. You did have, you know."

"Me?"

A lengthy moment she looked at him, without speaking.

"Tod Speckles, you can't stall *me*. I have reference to your inevitable rackus with the town toughs."

"Oh, yes, that. But, pshaw, nothing come of it. Just a little misunderstanding."

AUNT WEALTHY—A REMARKABLE SOUL

"And I suppose you are none the worse off for that little—misunderstanding?"

"Why, no—of course not. That is—"

"That is, not *much*," she finished for him.

Moving her chair up quite close to his, she fixed a knowing eye on Tod.

"Young man, I could spat you."

Tod smiled meaningly.

"Don't you think I couldn't, either."

"But why, Auntie? Spat me for what?"

"You very well know why. Dunc Huff has been up to his deviltry again. But I've got a feeling if he and certain of his cronies were to beat you half to death, you'd still put up with it. You wouldn't report them."

Nor did he now, as was ever his disposition.

After a brief somewhat awkward silence, she tried again. "Tod, if you deny or, rather, disclaim what I'm about to reveal, I'll spank you sure enough."

Again that knowing smile. "Now, Aunt Wealthy, you know I'm too big to spank."

"That," she returned, "is what *you* think. Listen. I spanked you, Tod Speckles, the very day I ushered you into this wayward world. I gave you a tunking . . . let me see . . . it was on your big ears. I boxed them in my kindergarten class once, for not listening to the lesson as they should. Right now, if you're not mighty careful, I'll spat you so hard on your—birthday you'll not be able to sit for a week. W-e-a-k. Get it?"

"Aw—Gosh! Aunt Wealthy. So it is my birthday today.

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Dog-gone it, you think of everything. Let's see, I'm—”

“Uh-huh! Seventeen years old. But,” she retorted. “I'll not give you one bite of the big fruit cake I made for the occasion until you promise to loosen up and tell me just what happened last celebration between you youngsters.”

“Well, you win, Auntie. For, now that you've told me, I couldn't resist an opportunity to partake of another of your fruit cakes — one of the many things for which you are famed.

“You know how it is with the Bishop, he's so concerned about Dunc. Not having a son of his own flesh and blood. So I didn't like to cause him any further—”

“So you mean to sacrifice as usual,” she again cut in.

After which Tod went on to explain just what had happened after that well-remembered main event—how that Huff and his disciples had framed him, falsely accused him and then had started to thrash him—even to the event of his rescue by the daring strange young girl.

Aunt Wealthy, who, for the moment, was quite busy between cupboard and table with cake, saucers, forks and napkins, halted abruptly before him to say “Hum, strikes me you owe that fair party something.”

“Yes, Auntie, I was just thinking—she deserves to meet *you*.”

“And, suppose I tell you I have already had the pleasure? That I had quite a long chat with her, in fact?”

“Sure enough—Aunt Wealthy?”

“Well, no thanks to you, young man.”

AUNT WEALTHY—A REMARKABLE SOUL

"But," said Tod, "I've only just met her. Tell me, Auntie, how does she strike you?"

"Me — huh — " she cocked a quizzical eye on him — "from all appearances you are the one who is struck."

"Aw—now, shucks—I—"

In full appreciation of the situation and with rare understanding of youthful hearts and souls, Aunt Wealthy saved him further embarrassment by coming to his rescue with "The truth is, my boy, I find her a very charming girl. But she's been petted and pampered a lot. Seems a trifle sad, too. But she's got the real stuff in her, I fancy. And she'll make some young fellow a good companion. That is—" she shot a humorous side glance at him—"if she gets in with the right party."

Thus, while they ate, they chatted away for some while, enjoying both cake and conversation.

And, when at last their pleasurable visit was ended and Tod was ready to leave, the wise dear gentlewoman waxed unusually earnest as she confided in him: "Tod, my lad, I don't mind telling you, I am very much concerned about Duncan Huff's influence among the young folks of our community. We all know the Bishop has lost all control of him. It's too bad, but he's just naturally of bad blood. When our good Bishop and his wife took him in as an orphan they were so anxious to make something out of him that they hate to admit their failure now. It's not their fault. Dunc is like his worthless Dad was, loose, wild, domineering. And he's like a cancer among our younger set. Mostly I'm concerned about Vick, my sister's

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boy. Dunc's got the wool pulled over Vick's eyes all right. Vick is inclined to be wayward, but I could influence him were it not for his loose pals. Duncan Huff is one boy I have utterly failed to influence for good."

Then she came up very close to her young friend and looked him squarely in the eyes while she continued:

"Tod, I know how he's centered his hatred, his deviltry on you. He seems bent on queering you with the young people. And it's my bet—there's only one thing that will do him any good—a dose of his own medicine. Tod Speckles," she all but prophesied, "I've got a feeling some day you'll have to knock that young scalawag end over appetite before he'll mend his way."

That said, all at once she took from her apron pocket a shiny round something, saying "Here—I recovered your dollar by spying on Vick—I made him give it to me by threatening to tell the Bishop about the whole affair. You see, Tod, they'll grow bolder and bolder in their pranks against you—they'll take advantage of your good nature, knowing that, out of your regard for the Bishop, you will suffer in silence."

She paused to lay a loving hand on his shoulder.

"But you can trust Aunt Wealthy, boy. I'll not breathe a word to anyone unless you say the word."

There was more than a hint of reverence in Tod's voice as he accepted the dollar, thanked her for everything and turned toward the door.

"Auntie, everything will come out all right so long as I know you are back of me!" With that he was gone.

Huff Makes a Threat

INDIAN summer drowsed over the little settlement.

Those few momentous events subsequent to the last celebration still afforded the youth fond reflection. It developed, however, that for all his triumph over past events Tod was to know more gala times in the following few months than perhaps any other period of his whole life, excluding, of course, a very unhappy ending.

Up to the present, work about the place had claimed him; what with the fall plowing, cutting of hay, cultivating and all, Tod had been kept extremely busy. So busy in fact that it now piqued him to recall his tardiness, regarding the fulfillment of a promise made to a certain fair young lady.

But now he moved dreamily along. He was cultivating the last long row of corn, with the luncheon hour not nearly at hand. He could afford to take it easy for the rest of the morning. Nor did he feel to urge his horse, for the beast seemed obsessed with the same languor that just now beset its master.

At the furrow's end, Tod let his sleepy co-worker stand where the latter had halted of its own free will. Here, on

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a grassy ditchbank, he was wont to stretch full length upon his back and gaze into the drowsy shimmering distances, over the little valley of meadow and field to the far peaks. Or at forest and dell. Or up at the fleecy clouds which veiled the blue. With ever upon his ears the soft soothing sound of corn leaves rustling in the breeze!

So it was only natural for, in these moments, the youth's thoughts to return to the girl with velvety eyes—his heart to experience a quiet happy longing! Not that he'd had no glimpse of her since that memorable occasion in the ground cherry patch. Rather, he had met and talked with her on several occasions from time to time. But he had found no time in which to show her about as he had promised, as, moreover, he had yearned to. That she, too, was not wholly indifferent to his existence, he could not help but note. In consideration of their first interview, thereafter he'd felt her eyes upon him around the corner of every public gathering. Tod smiled whimsically up at the fleeting clouds. Sweet remembrance! He could still see the pouting curl of her pretty lips . . .

What had possessed him at the time? Tod was by nature reserved, bashful, shy. But he had certainly met and matched *her* flippant mood. Ordinarily it had been his conviction—"to suffer an injury was better than to do an injury." But somehow he had felt that that young lady had needed opposition. So he had dared her, teased her, taunted her. Instinctively, deliberately, and with painstaking guile he had feigned indifference to her appeal. And he'd come off lighthearted, too. That was the worst of it,

HUFF MAKES A THREAT

or, rather, the *best* of it. The strangest thing about it was that he'd felt no twinge of regret. He could even yet feel that he was indeed glad. Glad that he had so completely, so successfully baffled her, taken her aback! Tod was troubled, though, about this strange new and wholly unexpected development in his life.

He did not, then, realize it, but the candid truth of the matter was — a certain pair of velvety eyes, a soft wistful light in their mystic depths, and those smiling, teasing, curling lips that belonged to the same fair flawless face, had warmed their way deep into his heart. Tod rose suddenly with an urgent desire, moreover, a solemn resolve to let his future actions compensate for his tardiness of the past two months. He meant to make good his promise —soon.

After lunch of that same dreamy day, Tod led their old jack-burrow out of the corral, slung across his back twin canvas water bags, climbed up behind them where they flapped one on either side and headed, at a jog trot, the beast toward the creek. This was almost a daily chore. Since Tod's father had never been able to afford the digging of a well, this was the family's only means of supplying them water. They were perhaps the only ones in town who must resort to this quaint method, regularly. Perhaps, yet, Tod had never until recently had such a poignant realization of this fact. As a boy he had looked forward to these trips, these rides along the piny hillside down to the creek astride the donkey. It had seemed fun then. But

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the *then* fun was, somehow, absent now. He felt something strangely different instead. Sensitiveness. He glanced furtively about him, as though he hoped not to be seen. But why?

Thus, as he quit the burrow's back, repaired to the spring and mirrored his face in its clear amber depths, Tod pondered: This change. . . . Was it only that he was getting older?

He stirred presently. Sighed resignedly.

Whereupon, he filled the water bags. Slung them from the back of the beast. And, was in the, what he at present deemed, undignified act of surmounting the jack's hind-quarters when, as if in answer to his somber soliloquy, a lusty laugh rang out from the grove of pines behind him, rasping on his drums.

Tod faltered.

Turning, he beheld—Dunc Huff, with the cause of his unwonted thoughts, Cula Payne, she staring, he sneering! This was what he had dreaded. . . . This was what he must face!

"Haw, haw, haw!" rang forth from his adversary, ending in an evil smirk.

Tod thought next, Aw—Guess I resolved too late; looks like the enemy has beat my time.

The girl's lingering look was evidently that of curious amaze. Tod fancied he could read in her thought processes: "How primitive! A jackass for a mount. Do you have to come away down here for water? What—no well? No pump or water pipes? What a quaint way to supply

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oneself with water! I didn't think such customs still existed."

Tod, at first, felt to shrink. If only the earth would cleave asunder, swallow him out of sight! But the disposition to shrink or evade did not long remain with Tod Speckles, now or ever. That same quiet fortitude—the same spiritual something of his inner self which had sustained him on the occasion when the girl had first taken stock of his plain attire, once more came to his rescue. After all, he was not responsible neither ashamed of his heritage. He broke the spell with:

"Hi, folks. It's a great day for browsing. How's things?"

No answer.

He tried again. "Now, is that a nice attitude to take?"

Heavy silence still.

Then, with the pert tilt of his head, he hissed in the direction of the donkey's lolling ear: "Well—the very idocy! Old-timer, can you—fancy that? Our lady friend holding up the whole works? A distinguished outfit like ours! While you bear up under all this weight. *Waiting* for just a word of friendly greeting."

"Oh, yes, of course. Hell-o, Tod. Pardon my not seeming affable. But, as you already know, I'm up here to—"

"See the sights!" piped up her escort, keenly enjoying the situation.

The girl frowned. "A potent part of my business is to study people and their customs," she said, more to the

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fellow at her side. Then she, once more facing Tod, said, "The unexpected appearance of you gave me a—" "Shock."

At this cheap wit of Huff's she swiveled her look to confront him, stamped her foot in perturbation. "Oh, I'm so—Duncan Huff, you're impossible! I'm sorry I ever consented to let you show me around." Then said, back over her shoulder, "Tod, what I meant was—you gave me a swell idea."

Still gloating, Duncan said, "Naw — you don't mean thet. Do you now?"

"Definitely!"

Tod, now in full appreciation of the occasion, straight-way relieved the tension with gallant frankness. "Aw, shucks," said he, "Cula, I trust you won't worry one mite about what he infers. What you see now is further evidence of my poverty."

Then she smiled at him, as only Cula could. And thereafter remained her sweetest self.

In view of which her escort babbled, "Ah, don't let thet sliver-sided punk soft-soap ya — with his smooth tongue and fancy talk. He's a corn-fed same as the rest of us. Never been out of these mountains. What's more, all his folks're poor as razor-backed hawgs."

She tartly retorted: "At that, I prefer his company to yours."

And, forthwith, she quit his atmosphere, to join Tod at the spring.

"You'll be sorry for thet move," the bully called after

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her. "You'll be sorry—soon!" So threatening, Huff turned abruptly on his heel and disappeared among the pinions.

"Girl, that makes you next to the most unpopular young person in town," remarked Tod, at this unexpected turn of affairs.

"Why?"

"'Cause. Dunc is a bad influence among the young people of this settlement, and, he hates me."

"And the most unpopular is—?"

"Me," he answered ungrammatically.

"Why you?" she asked with growing interest.

"Because I'm queer."

"Queer?"

"I mean," he chuckled, "I'm so different, they think me queer. For one thing, I don't mix much."

"Well, I should hate to think you weren't different from him, whose company I just spurned. Really, I can't see how a fellow like Duncan Huff could carry much weight with regular people."

Tod's voice rose concernedly. "Cula," he said, "I don't want you to get the wrong impression of our young folks generally. They are good, clean, fair-minded. But Dunc is crafty. He is shrewd enough to act an upright part for a good while to get their confidence. He's here, there, everywhere at once it seems, with plenty of brass to push himself onto people and then influence them against someone he don't like."

Cula then spoke entreatingly. "But I still do not under-

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stand—how you accept your lot with such calm. The way they wrong you, shun you, scorn you, while you stand peacefully by, apparently unruffled."

"It's partly that they don't understand *me*. My outlook is so dif—"

"A dreamer is always misunderstood. Don't you think? Uresha. And another thing," she over-ruled, leading him on in all sincerity—still mindful of his power to discern insincerity. "Your people in general seem so peaceful and unaffected by outside controversy. Since our first interview, I've attended some of their gatherings, both socially and religiously, and I am greatly impressed with their tranquillity. They seem to cooperate—without false pride or prejudice—in perfect harmony. They, so far as I can see, are devoutly, diligently engaged in furthering their own faith and principles without talking against other sects. Like so many denominations do. How can they be so devoutly bland, since, as I have learned, they have been so sorely persecuted, mobbed, massacred, driven from pillar to post?"

She paused expectantly.

"Blandness is an atmosphere of Godliness. Besides," he smilingly, intriguingly told her, "'we believe in being chaste'."

"You believe in being—w-h-a-t?"

At her bafflement he laughed amusedly. "I mean—c-h-a-s-t-e. I quoted from one of our principal articles of faith. You know, a moral standard. Nevertheless, as you say, the Latter-day Saints have been greatly persecuted.

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So much so in fact that I do believe they'd feel slighted without a certain amount of — being ridiculed at least. And girl, it is, at that, wonderful."

"Wonderful?"

He nodded. "Yup. Persecution is a darn good thing to have known."

"Why so?"

"Because—*'Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven,'* is a very special promise the Master made those who endure persecution and such. And we harbor no malice toward our offenders."

"Why then, may I ask, are you so set on refuting Bane Gray's—shall we say—outrage against your people if such, as you suppose, is not damming to your progress?"

"Gray's evil insinuations have no effect upon our members whatever. But, don't you see, he plants prejudice in the hearts of many who are on the outside. Many souls groping in darkness he keeps from knowing of the truth."

Cula, less vigorous, nodded. . . . Saints—these people! How Bane Gray had misjudged them! How she, too, had.

"And yet, I still marvel. When your people are so reviled, persecuted and unpopular in the eyes of the world—just how do they expect to gain great blessings? What is your outlook? What all-pervading, all-sustaining hope do you have which affords you such infinite calm?"

Tod enlightened: "It's a hope that soars beyond the wiles and woes of men. It's a hope of a hereafter. A hope

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beyond the puny portals of mortality and the cold confines of an earthly grave."

At his last words the girl suddenly caught her breath. Her face seemed somewhat to brighten. "Hereafter? Hope beyond the grave!"

He nodded. "The truth is, you've hit upon the very key-stone of our religion. Do you believe in a hereafter?"

"No. That is . . . I don't know. So few do. But look! The dearest sweetest mother in all the world died and left her daughter who adored her—she left *me* alone. *Mother!* The only happiness I ever knew was that I had with her. Do I want to see her and again be associated with my dear dead loved one? Do I!" Her voice ended on a dry sob.

Ever so quietly Tod said, "Well, you may."

The girl spoke fervently. "You say that as if you were stating the simplest fact—as if it were easy. How can you be so sure? How might one attain to such a glorious hope? What must one do to—"

"That question is as old as these hills." Tod's hand went out in a sweeping gesture. His thoughts were reverential but his answer, as he caught up the donkey's head, was noncommittal. "But that would be preaching." Then to the donkey:

"C'mon, old-timer." Yet these thoughts were racing through Tod's mind: If people would cleave more to simplicity—if the world in general would accept the simple sayings of the Saviour wherein, for example, He tells us the very gift of God is eternal life. Further, if people would dwell less on the unknowable, inconceivable things

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of their various cults; if they would cease trying to imagine God as some mythological monster who evolves from nothingness to assume such proportions as would fill the immensity of all space, and would think of Him as an actual tangible personality in whose similitude we are created; if people would consider themselves actual offsprings of Deity — then said mortalized intelligences would be less inclined to doubt the hereafter. If mortals would cease trying to mystify their minds with theories and dogmas pertaining to evolution and would concern themselves more about the plain practical plan of salvation which the Master instituted to the end of final perfection for our present and, by the way, everlasting identities — then their faith and hope in a hereafter would greatly increase. We should appreciate the fact that, as intelligences, we always existed and the ego of us was and is co-eternal with God. That our spirits were begotten of God to be heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. That we left our pre-existence or primeval state as spirits to come here and be tabernacled in our earthly bodies and here be schooled in principles of Godliness; later to return to the father of our spirits, at which time, if we have kept our grip on "the iron rod" faithfully following that path which leads to the "tree of life," we shall become sanctified celestialized beings and assume the glorious role of begetting other spiritual offsprings to partake of that same fruitful tree. That God himself is a branch or, moreover, is the very heart of this celestial family tree and once traveled the same limitless course of progression. Justice,

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reason, common sense, truth—all testify to such a plan of salvation and exaltation, not to mention that Holy Writ is replete with scriptural evidences which bear out that as mortals now are, Deity once was; and, as "God now is, man may become," through adherence to the laws and ordinances of His gospel. And this applies alike to both the living and the—*dead*.

What he told the girl was: "The other day you said you hoped I wouldn't think you snoopy. By the same token I don't want you to think me preachy. So I'll let you learn of our belief through your association with my people. I've always been sold on the idea that 'example is greater than precept,' anyway."

"But won't you just answer a few questions," she entreated. "Please."

Unhesitatingly Tod nodded again. "Sure."

"According to your words," she began, "I should entertain the hope of being with my mother hereafter. What are the requirements? How might I learn—"

"Salvation or that great hope lies in the application of the principle. So many people fail to apply the knowledge they already have. The way is narrow and simple, the path straight . . ."

When he had briefly reviewed to her the saving plan of Deity, the girl said, "You seem to make clear the way that I might work out my salvation and be resurrected, but what about mother? My happiness would never be complete without her. And she died without knowing of

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these truths. With no opportunity of living these principles."

He answered complacently. "But she will have the opportunity."

"How? When?"

"In God's own due time." Tod backed this statement with further reference to Holy Writ in which he seemed so well versed. "After His crucifixion, while Christ's body lay in the tomb 'He was quickened in the spirit and went and preached to the souls in the spirit world.' All who die without a knowledge of the Gospel will have the opportunity of hearing it there."

Cula sighed deeply. Her eyes dark as night were searching the amber depths of the pool as though she were still in darkness concerning certain points. "And yet," she breathed, after a still moment, "what about the other qualifications. If, as you say, one must obey the Gospel in every detail, baptism, for one thing, is an earthly ordinance, is it not?"

"Exactly."

"Then how can mother abide the principle?"

"By proxy."

"Proxy?"

"Uh-huh." He laughed with directness. "And when I prove to you that your mother can still receive watery baptism—then you'll have one of the outstanding *peculiarities* for which you seek. For, regardless of Malachi's prediction in the very last book of the Old Testament—the turn-

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ing of the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents, etc., to be accomplished in the last days, we are the only people who build temples for the purpose of carrying on vicarious work for the salvation of the dead."

After treating the subject to her satisfaction, referring also to "modern scripture," he said, "You won't mind if I leave with you the sentiment of our own—a most eminent leader—what he says in this connection?"

"Mind!" She was still nibbling at the food he had given her for thought. After an affected and very thoughtful pause she added: "Nothing could possibly be of more importance or of greater interest to me at present."

"This great man, a modern prophet of God, testified that his standing in the church, embracing these great and wondrous principles and the high standards of truth, virtue, honor and faith inculcated in these Gospel principles, meant more to him than this life—ten thousand times more. For,' he said, 'in this I have life everlasting.' In this he assured us, we have the promise of being associated with our loved ones throughout all eternity. That in obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel rests the glorious hope, of which you spoke, and the privilege of being reunited with our dear dead loved ones, friends, fathers, brothers, sisters—*mothers*. 'Without which there would be left nothing for us but—death, desolation, disintegration and disinheritance.'"

"Well, old-timer, let's get going," Tod urged his donkey. "I've got things to do."

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Still wrapped in thought, reluctantly the girl rose from the grassy bank beside the little spring, saying, "If you don't mind, I'll walk to the crossroads with you."

Tod laughed admiringly. "If *you* don't mind. Some city girls would, you know."

"As if I care," she quickly assured him. "Yours truly always does what she wishes — perhaps to her regret, at times," she annexed, with no small show of irony.

"Anyway—" Tod spoke after what seemed a lengthy silence—"I hope you still want me to show you around. I said *me*."

"It strikes *me* you're rather delinquent at doing so," she retorted.

"Sure. I know it's my fault. Gosh. I've been so busy. But I've sure been thinking—I mean I've wanted to," he amended. "From now on though—"

At his confusion she laughed joyously. Excepting when he was dwelling on his favorite subject, that of religion, he seemed so simple—so delightfully boyish.

"From now on—you had better not leave me in no better company than I had today. You had *better* fulfill your promise—right away."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"What do *you* think?" Then: "Take your choice."

"Well . . . if it's convenient for both parties concerned we'll start day after tomorrow."

She said, "The sooner the quicker."

"Settled. And Girl, I've got a keen idea. I told you our

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people believed in modern revelation, and scripture not alone of the Bible. Remember?"

"Yes."

"Well," he went on to explain, "and since you are up here to study the ways of my people—gosh this'll be great—I'll show you the hieroglyphics, the caves and—"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Her puzzlement set another of those slow wholesome smiles spreading over his face.

"Just another of our little peculiarities. You see, a latter-day seer, the founder of our church, over one hundred years ago dug out of a hill, in New York, a book of new scripture. That is, an angel appeared to him and informed him of its whereabouts. This book, though it in no way contradicts the old Bible, clears up many, many points on Gospel doctrine which are not made clear in Bible scripture—that's why we can be sure of the principles I was telling you about . . ."

"Yes, yes, go on. These—er—*peculiarities* strike me as being advantageous."

"Well—and this is what concerns you and I most at present—the book also proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, its own authenticity by making mention of certain tools, implements, vessels, disclosing the engravings, characteristic of the tribes of people who first inhabited this land of America—the forefathers of the American Indians. Now, these ancient people dwelt to a great extent right here in these very mountains. Many signs, tools, vessels, hieroglyphics and whatnot have been discovered

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here bearing evidence of this fact. Perhaps in no other country has there been more wondrous discovery of these things than right here. The point is, *I* am taking *you* to see some of these wonders. Can you ride a horse?"

"Can I! Say, I've been on trips with Dad where we *had* to ride, off and on, for days."

"Good. We have plenty of riding ponies. So we'll head for the caves in Cave-valley first. After that, many other places of interest—I'll take you and show you the things pertaining to those ancient people, cliff-dwellers."

The girl's face was all aglow with pleasurable anticipation. "I'm so thrilled," she told him, velvety eyes beaming up into his own wide ones.

By this time they had reached the crossroads.

"Uh-huh. Just now, though, I gotta get busy and give my race horse a workout."

"Race horse?"

"Yes. Our enter-all horse racing is the greatest event—you've heard about our big celebration on the twenty-fourth of July?" he said interrogatively.

"Oh, of course." She remembered. "It's your greatest church celebration of the year. Commemorating the arrival of your pioneer leaders out west. And, by the by, it was your great friend, Aunt Wealthy, who told me. I've met her, you know. And she's certainly type-high. Already I'm in love with her."

"I'm glad. Girl, I'm anxious for you and her to be close friends, which I know you will be." And he verily meant it. "Now, what do you say we start with our sight-seeing

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excursions and end up by celebrating the Twenty-fourth—*together!* Will you be here that long, Cula?"

She was glad that he cared.

"Let's!" she responded to his buoyant spirit. "We'll make it—the greatest gala days ever." And she meant it.

"Settled." Then he told her, "So long until tomorrow morning."

She sweetly said—"Good-bye, Tod."

Gala Days

THOSE days! In all God's wonder-world there had never been anything quite like it. Friends—companions and—if you will—lovers! Not merely lovers, in the commonplace, neither carnal sense of the word. Not that. They were serene, companionable love-mates of the soul. Love unadulterated—supreme! It were as if each found in the other that which, thus far in their youth, had been somehow surely missing—understanding youthful hearts. As sublimely as did Romeo and Juliet these two roamed and laughed and romanced together in a primitive-like yet ever-to-be-remembered episode before their Gethsemane!

In retrospection of this heavenly period of romance, later, Tod was to know regret and inwardly groan. To have had such ecstasy and then lose it! Or, would they be left with only an abiding memory of it?

While it lasted, in sunshine and shadow, on the rugged Sierras, they rode together, raced together, romped together. Early, on fair-weather days, when blessed sunrise had caused the languid sky to brighten over them, they

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would "light out" and not infrequently they'd return late. At times they would frolic in some cool secluded nook or glade or dell—just roam and frolic, with little to say, just laughing together now and then at the merry little pranks they'd do. Then at times they would ride until they reached some mountain streamlet. Here, beneath the deep grassy banks, they'd fish for speckled trout. Or, jump from their saddles, peel off socks and shoes, to wade in water clear as ice and fresh as dawn. Wade until she'd slip on a slick rock or squeal that she'd hurt her small foot. Then he'd catch her up into his wiry arms and gallantly bear her away to some cave or cliff or grassy, picturesque cove, where they'd lunch and lounge and laugh some more. And, needless to say, Tod knew of all the lovely nooks for miles around. A lover of nature, he could take her where the brook ran deepest between grassy banks, or, to greatest pools. Wild grapes, strange plants, a thousand varieties of charming and various-colored flowers, many a bright-winged creature—all these he could point out and name for her. "Oh!" she'd exclaim, "How lovely!" or "Aren't they darling!" After which Tod would smile happily, the while he dreamed into her soft velvety eyes—eyes aglow with romance!

And Tod made good his promise, too, pertaining to her writer's interest. They explored the caves in Cave-valley. He showed her many signs of the cliff-dwellers' realms. Stone axes they discovered. "Oyeas," arrowheads, hieroglyphics engraved on sheer huge boulders. Cupped and hollowed-out rocks which, he explained to her, had been

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used by the aborigines for vessels in which to mix their bread and grind their corn.

"These all go to prove out what I was telling you. These ancient curios are described in the new book of scripture which came to light in these latter days. The book is also a record of the inhabitants of the eastern hemisphere. And it is the only record, in fact, that accounts for the Indians being here when America was discovered. The point I wish to make," Tod told her, "is that Bane Gray, the world-famed author, very much trifled with the truth when he wrote that ours is a narrow, ungodly and misguided people. For, on the contrary, no religious organization has more literary, historical, scriptural or divine guidance than we, since we have this God-given record of how Christ appeared on this continent and dispensed the same Gospel teachings that He gave to the people of the east. What's more, our book of modern scripture reveals the Gospel in a most plain, practical and impressive manner, leaving no room for doubt."

Yet how pallid the girl's face always looked when he made mention of that name—Bane Gray, in this connection! How shadowy and unfathomable her soft dark eyes! Sometimes her tragedy touched him. Always it puzzled him. What had been her past? What had been her lot? What, of an awful, woeful, disturbing nature, had overshadowed one so young and beautiful! But, wisely enough, he did not question her. He divined that she would tell him when she wanted him to know.

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Once she had said, "How can you be sure, Tod, that Christ visited and established His church upon this the American continent—that, by the by, your modern record of it was even inspired or given of God? Might not your prophet have been an impostor in the first place?"

"In the first place," Tod expressed himself, "reason is truth. Is it reasonable to suppose that if God had children here in this land, as well as in the land across the water, He would not attend them also, minister to them, teach them the same plan of salvation? He does not show partiality. He is no 'respecter of persons.' Besides, in the Jewish Bible are to be found numerous predictions—'God has spoken by the mouths of all the holy prophets since the world began' that He would proceed to do 'a marvelous work and a wonder—' reveal the Gospel 'to every nation and kindred and tongue and people.' Ezekiel and other Biblical prophets make clear, in their predictions, that a record would be kept of a people who would cross over the waters to foreign lands. In fulfillment of this our new scriptural record accounts for this same people doing so. These were of those people who were scattered at the time of the destruction of the tower of Babel. The new history tells how they migrated, wandering into the wilderness for years, finally to construct a ship and drift across the ocean to land on the west coast of South America, and from there progress northward. Also, bear in mind, Christ was on the eastern hemisphere when, according to New Testament scripture, He declared: '*Other sheep I have which are not*

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of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd.' ”

And then—the celebration—that ever-to-be-remembered twenty-fourth day of July, which was to do things to them. Change things for Cula and Tod!

Just now they rode side by side down the main and only through street, he cheerfully relating the daring and dexterous feats of bygone days of like occasions, she listening, laughing at times, or in turn gasping at the mention of some stunt which she considered “awfully dangerous.” Thus, keenly keyed to the momentous occasion, they headed toward the crowd where the program was getting under way, nor had either any least premonition of impending evil.

Tod was telling her, “I’ve got a surprise for the folks today. Old Bird here—” he patted the withers of the mare he was riding — “has been awarded more than one blue ribbon for leading the race in main events. Until recently, she’s been considered the swiftest racer in town. But Dunc brought in a new one on us this year. From the valley, Juarez I believe. It’s that shiny big black you can see from here. Dunc’s riding him. And everybody expects Dunc to win with him this Twenty-fourth. That is, everybody but me,” he added, that same brimming smile enhancing his facial features.

“And *you* still believe in the little lady who has so faithfully and efficiently served you, brought you triumph in the past?”

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"No. I'm sorry. But I know something about horseflesh. Dad was a lover of horses. Always said next to his family he loved his racers best. He had some thoroughbreds, too. He taught me concerning their finer points. So I realize—Dunc's black is no common broomtail.

"But listen!" Tod shifted in saddle. Leaning toward the girl his voice grew vibrant, as with thrill of assurance that something carefully planned and long-hoped-for would shortly come to pass. "*I've* got a new racer, too. A spirited young pinto, little more than a colt. When I first cut him out of the band of mavericks, running loose on the range, I knew he was an ace. I've kept him out of the public's eye for months. I've trained him religiously. Cula, he's my ace in the hole. And he's simply got to come through for me!"

He hadn't said so, but Cula read in both the mien and the manner of her companion that his desire was born of something infinitely greater than mere personal interest.

"But where is he now? Why aren't you riding your pinto?"

"The races come off last," he informed. "I'll ride him out fresh and foxy when the time comes."

"Tod, I hope from the bottom of my heart that you do win."

"Girl—I hope you get your hope!"

By every indication this "Twenty-fourth" showed promise of becoming an exhilarating one. After the parade of course, which was always the opening feature of any

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pioneer celebration. The long line of covered wagons drawn by oxen; and hand-carts rolled by men, women and children — all in representation of a humble, homeless, poorly-clad and mob-riden people who once trudged their way over hundreds of miles of trackless, untamed desert, always held the on-lookers to a reverential silence. Pride, pathos and exultation mingled their emotions in Tod's breast whenever he witnessed one of these reproductions of the immigrant trains which, in the very heart history of those trying times, braved formidable hazards to build up the magnificent empire which they later gave to that nation many of whose people had proven their sorest goad!

"Surely," breathed Cula, when the last plightful vehicle had rounded a corner to disappear off Main Street, "It can't be true—that these pioneers traveled more than one thousand miles with such poor means!"

"But it is," Tod assured her. "The extent of their sorrow and suffering has never been sung. And the unknown, unmarked graves of those the grim-reaper claimed, through exposure, starvation, savages and other hardships, are not a few by the wayside. But look! The fun begins."

If one has known only the glitter and glamour of urban affairs he or she cannot appreciate the exhilaration that can and does exist in one of these small inter-mountain celebrations. Nor has Hollywood as yet claimed all the greatly-skilled and talented performers of the vast out-of-doors. Not the tinsel gallantry and glamour, nor the sham and gaudy show. No petty games of chance. Nor mouthy lusty criers, with their tinsel toys and their showy

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tents of vice and lure. Not such. For, in these celebrations is to be found clean, wholesome, hearty fun-making—sports, games, pageants and exhibitions that tend to amuse, educate, and uplift. These simple-hearted, genial, God-fearing colonizers made up in spirit what they lacked in flash and flurried appearance.

And no reverie, however deep, could withstand that spirit of these occasions.

"To think that I had supposed these good people to be pious and fanatic!" was the way that Cula Payne, in the progress of events, expressed her feelings.

"If you're enjoying yourself, then I am glad," her companion answered, affirmatively.

"*If I am!*" she acquiesced, animated. "Why, beneath the surface of their sincerity most everyone seems so carefree and happy." And thereafter this city-bred girl, forgetting for a day at least the artificial bejeweled atmosphere of her former existence, entered into it all with a spirit that bade fair to rival any and all other enthusiasts present. Yet rarely has there been a more humble and harmonious functioning of activity. A spirit of joviality and brotherhood accelerated all. Neighbor met neighbor, friend met friend, Brother met Brother in a competitive yet genial manner that might well be admired by some of our self-called, more-civilized members of society.

However, as is always the case when tranquillity would tend to hold sway, the adversary fails not to find at least one through which, by dint of his subtle designs, he can work disquieting opposition. And so it developed—that

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which was to prove the ensuing main event no exception to the rule. Perhaps it was the sudden appearance of Tod at this juncture, atop his prancing pinto, which inspired this deviltry. Or, it might have been the way that his spirited girl friend came over to him before the race started just now, impulsively squeezed his tawny fingers and said, "Oh, Tod, I do so want you to win. Here's luck!"

"Girl, I need it. More than you'll ever know."

And of course Duncan Huff would see this bit of ardent byplay. That his already all-consuming jealousy was no less mitigated by what he observed is a fact that is likely to stand, unattested.

"Get ready for the main event!"

Hilarity died to a murmur that ran over the entire crowd and then ceased abruptly as the Master of Ceremonies once more called out stentorously—"All out for the enter-all horse race!"

At the starting line, already the horses began to bunch and bob. Silence, at the outcome post, reigned, save for an occasional point-blank remark: "Dunc's on the line with his big black now. Gee! He's mighty big—powerful." Or eager inquiry such as "I wonder where Tod got his paint pony? Is it his? Did you know Tod was entering a different horse this year?" The unanimous opinion was—"That pinto is a likely-looking colt. Pretty too!"

All eyes were on the, now, row of horses, waiting, strenuously watching. Intense silence now—not a murmur. Until:

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"The flag is down! *They're off!*!" came the official announcement, thrillingly.

A deep and deafening yell, which rose even above the shouts and clamorous din of the crowd, was heard to proclaim, "Dunc's black is out front—leadin' 'em!" Then, as abruptly as the yell had risen it ceased.

"Spy-glass" leveled, the announcer stood up stiff and eager in his stirrups. "Folks, the pinto's stretchin' out! Look . . . Looket that paint colt leap!"

"He's gaining! . . . gaining . . . Tod's gaining on him!" chimed they all.

Closer and closer drew the pinto.

"Come on Tod— Come on Tod!" a girlish voice was heard to call, to thrill.

Again the official announced: "Folks they're comin' like twin streaks, and the boys are stickin' tight as cuckle-burs! . . . They're runnin' almost neck 'n' neck . . ." Then: "It's a strange thing, folks, seems like neither horse can gain on the other now."

Cula's heart did a double catapult and then seemed to stand still. What was wrong? Tod's horse had been gaining steadily, rapidly, surely. Until . . . then it occurred to her—until the pinto had come alongside Dunc's black. Could it be that Dunc was riding down Tod's horse? The thought was unsupportable, incredible.

"It's plain there's more to this race than a dark and spotted horse," observed the announcer.

To the girl standing breathlessly by, on the side opposite

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Tod, it seemed only a dark horse. The pinto was completely hidden by the black . . .

Then, much to her delight she caught a flash of white, just to the fore of Dunc's black horse. It was the pinto's white nose! All of her girlish lover's blood seemed to gush in her veins, in one great thrilling throb. Tod was going to win! What a magnificent race this was! How wonderfully, in long low leaps, they came on! How swiftly! . . .

"Three-quarters of the way," came the official call.

But with startling suddenness then it happened—the black and pinto racers seemed to merge—to clash . . . the pinto reared . . . wrenched at his bit . . . wheeled . . . came down out of control.

"I knowed it. He's just a flighty colt, too spirited." "Yeah. He's out of it now. Dunc's black has won! *Hurrah!!!*"

What a terrible sickening disappointment for at least two parties present! As for Tod, he had been close enough to hear those last galling remarks of the crowd. By the time he had the pinto under control Dunc's horse had passed the pole of much significance—he, Tod, had lost the race. More than that, he had lost the accompanying prize money—the one hundred dollars! *Which would mean the loss of his home!*

He trotted his horse through and beyond the crowd to where Huff was jerking his black to a stop. Nor had he paid the slightest heed to the milling, clamoring throng. He heard them not. And he saw them only dimly through a mist.

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"Dunc Huff," he accosted, choking back the tears, "*that* was the most dastardly thing you ever done to me!"

"Whadaya mean!" snarled Huff.

Both riders dismounted, eyes glinting.

"Don't lie, Dunc. And why add insult to injury? You know mighty well what I mean. You crowded me. Purposely. Made your horse strike mine, causing him to sidetrack."

"Ah! You can't prove that. You—"

"I know!" Tod cut him off. "I'd have no chance to prove it. The folks all think my pinto flighty. But I wanted *you* to know—you didn't fool *me* none. And you're lower than a lizard's belly, Dunc! You've not only wronged me, but you've made my little mother homeless besides!"

Huff leered. "Well—what're you gonna do about it, mama's little manikin?"

For a lengthy moment Tod stared at him, but with eyes that saw him not. As if looking through and beyond his adversary, Tod sighted Bishop Weston, approaching them. "Nothing!" He spoke more to himself. And thereupon, abruptly turning, started to leave.

"Then I'll poke your precious face for accusing me wrongly." Without further warning, the bully leaped after Tod, blocking his way; at the same time swinging a "hefty" right that caught his victim squarely on the jaw. Tod floundered to earth. But, with the agility of a cornered kitten he regained his legs, bristled, sprang at his antagonist.

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Huff, evidently, had not expected this. He had meant to ignore the other. For he was turning to his horse when Tod reached him with a flurry of well-timed blows. Dunc halted in his forward stride . . . lost his balance and went down like a haggled sapling. His look, when he regained his equilibrium, was manifestly that of blank and foolish surprise.

There followed a silence of uncertainty, wherein Huff was nursing an injured chin . . .

"So you're not true to your pious principles, eh?"

"Meaning?"

"When a fella pops ya on one side," sneered Huff, "I thought ya believed in turnin' the other cheek. Don't the good book say that?"

"Sure. Here it is. And with the same sad returns." So saying, Tod pertly protruded his jaw toward the bully.

Due to the very suddenness of this act, Duncan Huff was momentarily taken aback. But only briefly did he hesitate. True to his inglorious type, he made a furious pass at the slighter-built one, and there is little doubt as to what the outcome would have been had not at that instant the robust form of Bishop Weston intervened.

By this time a crowd had gathered. And so, amid mingled cheers and chronic jeers Tod turned away with a weighty heart.

Tod Retaliates

ANGUISH and pride battled for mastery over Tod Speckles as he swung to saddle, goaded his mount and went lopingly homeward. Mortified, he hadn't even waited for his girl companion. For the first time in his life bitter red rage possessed him. The tempter whispered revenge. Never before had the adversaries of his soul persisted with him to such an unmanning extent. After all the months of diligent preparation, of hoping, waiting—only this! He suffered mentally. He fought spiritually, battling for self-mastery. But in the end he feared the future. How could he endure so great a loss? Such damnable treachery! Then it slashed him like the cold cutting edge of a knife—why should he! . . .

But for concern which he had for his morbid little mother, Tod might have vanquished fear—malice and temptation.

Wherefore it was a different—a grim and disconcerted Tod who opened the stately whitish gate late that same evening and made his way resolutely along the path which

TOD RETALIATES

led to the Bishop's house. Upon reaching the front door, he stood immobile for a moment, listening. He heard nothing inside. Then he rapped soundly on an upper panel.

No response. Not that Tod had expected any. The folks were supposed to have attended the ward-house "doings." Nor did he wish to encounter anyone, in view of such ignominy. He grasped with tremulous fingers, now, the door latch. Pausing, he looked back over his shoulder. Somewhere near the base of the building a frog croaked dolefully. A lengthy moment he hesitated, falteringly, reluctantly, as though upon the very threshold of his galling venture he felt to turn back. His eyes lifting, he gazed on high. Slowly his lips moved, lisped something, as though he were solemnizing a plea for pardon for that which he was about to do. A full white flaunting moon looked down upon him, somehow pitiless in its cool radiant splendor. Tod shivered . . .

Then with tardy attention to the door he eased it open and stepped inside . . . Still no sound of anyone. Only the ticking of the mantel clock! Satisfied that no one was in, he closed the outer door and made his way gropingly toward the partition wall which separated the parlor from the Bishop's study.

"Let's see, it would be about here," cogitated Tod, in somberness, as with trembling fingers he felt for the partition door. His hand struck the doorknob presently, registering a sound that shivered his very soul. Battling for self-control, he turned the knob and pushed on the door. How loudly it squawked! Tod recalled evenings when, upon

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groping in the gloom of a chicken coop, feeling along the roost for the legs of some sleeping fat hen to kill, he had grasped those legs only to have said hen emit a similar sound.

Once inside the study, Tod felt, found and began to trace out the desk-top, toward the safe, which he knew to be located just beyond the writing desk . . . Well did the youth remember that iron vault. As a Deacon, for time out of mind, seemingly, it had been his duty to collect offerings and "bring them in," to the Bishop who had not hesitated to usher him inside this very room. Together they had checked the contributions. After which, in the presence of Tod, always the Bishop would deposit the cash amount here in the safe. Once Tod had laughingly jested, "It's a good thing I'm not a burglar. I've watched you work that dial so much I believe I could open the safe myself."

"I'll bet you could at that," had been Bishop Weston's genial rejoinder. "More than a family vault, this might be called a community one as well." But little had the youth dreamed that he would someday actuate the supposition. He paused with his fingers upon the dial . . . What awful scurvy trick of fate was this which had placed him in such an ignominious circumstance? But with the up-flashing of the picture—with once more vividly upon the screen of his mind the incident of that ever-to-be-remembered race and Dunc's inglorious conduct subsequently, Tod renewed his somber resolve. He strained his ears once more . . . Profound silence reigned, save for the rhythmical tick-tock, tick-tock of the huge mantel clock in the parlor . . .

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Then with settled purpose, the youth standing there in the dark, reached up cautiously and drew down, still lower, the window shade. Ever so carefully he struck a match and began to work the dial. After all, why not? That one hundred dollar prize money — was it not rightfully his anyway!

His Soul at Bay

PENURY and drudgery, not to mention sacrifice, had thus far been the predominating influences, uncompromising, in the life of Tod Speckles.

And now—this utter desperation!

By right of his years he was still a youth. Erect, he would have measured six feet. His great eyes were amethyst-blue, kinky hair blondish, his features regular with profile clean-cut. Well-curved mouth topped his comely chin. Just now, however, as he stood at the rustic hearth-side, bent and bowed, silent, dejected and with woeful, unseeing eyes fixed on the blank hearth, he effected not a little the aspect of a much older man.

The room, high-ceiled, spacious and very poorly furnished, was typical of those belonging to the old pioneer two-roomed cottages; whose adobe walls and steep gable roof were rather dilapidated, whose doors were dejected, whose paint was "scaly," and whose windows, battered and patched, resembled somewhat the eyes of a defeated pugilist. Yet its interior lacked nothing of the feminine touch . . . Allowing for her impoverished situation and her ailing condition, Widow Speckles had done everything in

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her power to make their humble abode neat, clean and homey; to say nothing of her own cheery self scurrying about the place, striving ceaselessly to drive dull cares away.

Tonight, however, her son seemed utterly oblivious to her presence.

"Toddie—"

He seemed not to hear . . .

"Son, won't you come and have a bite to eat?" A toil-worn hand fluttered over his abject form, to rest lovingly upon his drooping shoulder.

"No—Mom," abstractedly.

"But, Tod—" his mother's voice rose pleadingly—"despite all, you must have nourishment. Come. Let me fix you something . . . a warm drink at least."

But still he remained unmoving. And, for some moments, wordless silence prevailed.

At length she sighed resignedly and turned toward the kitchen, murmuring more to herself: "My dear boy—it hurts my heart to see you brooding so." Then, as she closed the living-room door between them, her voice trailed off pathetically and she breathed a brief, scarcely audible phrase that might have been meant for her Maker.

She returned presently, a steaming cup in hand.

"Here, son, drink this—please," she implored. "It isn't much and I venture it's quite palatable."

Still in somber cogitation, the youth received the proffered cup. Yet he only sipped its contents. Mechanically he drew up a chair to the fireplace and sat gazing

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into its emptiness, dreamily absorbed, preoccupied, grim. Times were when cheery flames had flared and sparkled here, casting strange fitful shadows across the frayed carpet. Ah! The hearthside was now no source of delight; how like his present outlook — all void and blank and cheerless! For long he sat there. Nor was his cup, as yet, entirely empty.

Mrs. Speckles, watching, grew very concerned. "You seem deeply troubled tonight, Tod," at last she ventured.

Rising now, Tod Speckles paced to and fro across the room. He stopped once more before the fireplace. He gazed long and hard into its ashen depths. His muscles tensed. Knuckles waxed pale against the rim of his cup. Of a sudden, then, he dashed the remaining liquid into the fireplace. Slipping from hand to hearth, the cup . . . "went to pieces," too, as if in keeping with his own vehemence.

"Why, Tod, what in the world is the matter?" Again she strove to repel his shadowy mood. "What has happened? It must be something terrible—"

Without a word he strode to the window and peered out into the night. His manner was as if some woeful spirit of the infernal pit were stalking him, seeking to destroy his life and usefulness.

After a brief pause, since he vouchsafed no reply, Mrs. Speckles resumed, pleadingly, quite sorrowfully: "Come, Toddie, lad—come sit down here and tell your old mother all about it." She waved him to a seat on one of the two chairs which she had placed not far apart. "Surely," she

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went gallantly on, "it's not too awful for us to thrash out together—like we always have."

A short laugh burst unbidden from his heaving breast. With settled purpose then, he came and stood before her.

"Mom," he said, ironically, "the worst has happened."

Ensued an ominous pause for emphasis—wherein Marta Speckles steeled herself for what she felt would be forthcoming. Save that her fingers clutched a trifle harder the arm-rests of her chair, she betrayed no outward emotion. Almost two score and ten years of rich experience had gone into the molding of this wise and sterling character. Her lovely figure with its well-formed profile evinced the fact that she had formerly been beautiful. But many years of perverse circumstances had stamped in her face deep, uncomely wrinkles, effecting in all a rather old-young expression. Her hair had been prematurely gray. Her eyes were soft and sad. Yet in those soft brown eyes, still beamed a lustrous light—the strength of her splendid womanhood.

And now, as ever, a spirit serene and rare held sway. "Toddie," she softly said. "I don't quite understand. Always you have been so brave, so devout. Why do you feel to despair at present?"

Tod's chest rose and fell heavily, and his breath came like a gust which blows before a gathering storm.

"Because, Mom—I'm ruined—today I lost the race!"

Having weathered, as it were, many blasting storms, unruffled, and with her extraordinary, never-failing calm, the old-young gentlewoman held her son's gaze. And,

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when the downpour of his overwrought emotions had partly subsided, she took his strong gripping hands in her slender wasted ones. She pulled him down beside her. She pressed her cheek to his. Affectionately she put her arms around him. Tenderly she stroked his drooping head. "I know how you feel, Tod. But you must not despair. You're bound to lose at times."

"Aw—Mom, it's not only that."

"Not *only* that?"

"No. This touches the biggest things in my heart."

He was walking the floor again and speaking with a depth of feeling that betrayed soul hunger, and which stirred his listener to unsuspected depths.

"It's hard to explain. And yet, I've felt that you've known all along, Mom. It's a strange longing inside me. Yearning. A strong urge to *do something—worth-while*. I've felt it! I've dreamed it! As far back as I can remember, I've divined that I have a calling—a specific mission to fulfill. Yet poverty has held me back!"

"And now to think that right when things were about to come my way—that ungrateful bully, Dunc Huff, had to throw ice water on everything. Dunc who cares for nothing but a good time—and to feather his own cap!"

"Why, Tod! What is all this you're saying?"

"I'm telling you, Mom, Dunc Huff rode me down today—he caused me to lose the one hundred dollar prize—by crowding my horse off the track! And I don't need to tell you how much that money meant to us right now! Besides, Dunc has it in his power to queer me with Cula

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Payne—about the only young person in town who really believes in me."

"Oh—he couldn't do that!"

"But it's true!"

Widow Speckles was wholly conscious of the importance of the moment. This was indeed a testing time for her son—a raging tempest on the sea of life which, if she did not help him to steer safely through, would perhaps cast him midst an ocean of adversaries, with success, happiness and honor hanging in the balance. Hence she summoned reserved fortitude.

"Listen, my boy, I appreciate your predicament." She smiled whimsically. "Remember, Toddie lad, your mother's boys were all girls except one. And I'm counting on you, son! I've centered all my fond hopes in you, my only boy. I've prayed and planned for your future. So I plead with you—don't let these seemingly insufferable circumstances master you, nor destroy the good you've already done.

"Now, Tod, I, too, have experienced that same urge of which you speak. I, too, have had lofty aspirations. We all are dreamers more or less. But no doubt you are exceptionally so. In fact, I think that same was inborn in you. And yet, if, after my many years of hardships, bereft of my companion and most of my children, I can still hope to realize my ambitions through my son, why can't *you* remain steadfast? Why can't you trust your Maker for a more favorable future? I recall a great man's words to

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his sons: 'Oh that thou mightest be like unto the mountains, firm and steadfast and immovable, etc.' "

"That's all well and good, Mom, but after all, has our long-suffering got us anywhere? And I couldn't just go on hoping and moping and see you throwed out of your home. In spite of all, that's the one thing I couldn't endure. No, Mom, there is nothing you can do about it—now."

"What *is* this you are saying, my boy?"

Then the bitter, bitter truth was voiced:

"I stole into the Bishop's tonight and took what rightfully belongs to us!"

"Tod! *You*—"

"Which — will queer me with my people for good. I haven't a Chinaman's chance in this town any more. So, you see, I must get away from it all. I've already paid Maston, and I'm leaving—now!"

"No — no — Toddie lad! It is always best to stay and face—"

Fate ruled the decision, however. Or, was it fate? For, at that moment, a loud knock sounded at the front door.

Hastening to answer it, the old-young gentlewoman was confronted by Marshal Skaggs.

"Widow Speckles," he said, point-blank, "I have a *very* important message for your son!"

And Tod, listening, heard no more. A wild rush in his veins and his heart bounding madly, he faced swiftly rearward. Several quick, soundless strides, and he was out of the house, stealing away through the gloom.

Lost

AT FIRST he had hurried, terror-driven. Tod had traveled from his humble home in the mountain settlement to the sweltering border town of Yuma as fast as horseflesh and then steam-driven steel could carry him.

Scarcely waiting for the train to stop, he had vaulted the observation rail, and, giving the station a wide berth, had headed for the Colorado River. Terror lent propellers to his travel-weary limbs. Still running fleetly, he had crossed the bridge that spanned the red liquid border between Arizona and California. Not until he had reached the California shore did he turn to look back.

And now, with wild and furtive eyes, he scanned the way that he had come. His chest rose and fell heavily with his panting breath. "If they were laying for me there," he burst out, staring toward the station, "so far I've given them the run-around." Then, not unhurriedly, he made his way to the nearest eminence which would hide him from all mankind. Nor did he tarry here. Not far away he sighted a zone of vegetation, and he set his face toward it.

Again he turned to look back—and again. It were as if

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he fostered but one intent—to seek remoteness—to place a goodly distance of desolation between himself and . . . the inevitable, he reflected, bitterly.

All day and night he traveled with scarcely no respite. He climbed and clambered up ragged benches. Hurriedly he trod the gravel stretches. Through brush lands, over cactus, lava, and greasewood he journeyed, avoiding cat-claw and isolated patches of ocatilla.

Now he trudged with lagging footsteps. On a billowy sea of seething sand, he plodded, his sight blurred by scalding tears.

"Aw, Mother!" he muttered, bitterly, "if only I had been endowed with more of your patience and stability. If only I had heeded your loving advice instead of yielding to the cruel lash of circumstances, I would not be here now. Lost. Fearful. Thirsty. Like some desperate creature at bay!"

Thereupon, like a soul in the dreadful, woeful opaque abyss of hopelessness, Tod felt to revile all earthly and infernal forces which had hurled him here. Out here in this vast inferno — this "hunk" of sun-blasted hell on earth! And his lips uttered a bitter soliloquy that his heart did not approve.

The sun blazed down from a cloudless sky. Tod staggered on. One after another he surmounted those countless dunes of sand. An eternity it seemed of ceaseless trudging—of climbing up and plodding down. And the descent was worse than the ascent. On the heights he suffered the intense heat. But more and more, as he would

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drop down between the dunes, he was assailed by swirling sands. His eyes smarted. His head throbbed. Like broiled tripe was his swollen tongue. The saliva was thick and pasty in his mouth. Ominous specters danced and grimaced before his eyes. The wind surged heavily against him, rendering his progress more laborsome. Tiny beads of perspiration oozed from the pores of his skin. Then at length his skin dried and shriveled. His throat grew taut and dry. Withal, he experienced a terrible almost insufferable thirst.

"Oh—Elohim! I am forever doomed," he cried, through parched and swollen lips.

Tod was heading, in a general way, toward a far, jagged peak, north and to the west. Atop one of the highest dunes, he had sensed more than sighted this most lofty peak of the San Jacinto Mountains. Was this bold peak beckoning to him? If so—why? Presumably the youth felt no least premonition of anything awaiting him beyond that mountain peak. And yet, despite his spent condition and his hopeless situation, from time to time in a vague way, his eyes would search it out for an objective point. Perhaps it was only that he welcomed the sight of this ragged sentinel as an alleviation to the monotony of these barren reaches of billowing sands. The very openness of the desert appalled him. He feared yet reverenced it. Inwardly he was deeply moved with mingled wonderment and awe. The vastness, the solitude, the loneliness—this whole blasted desert impressed a nameless, inexpli-

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cable something upon his soul that was fairly overwhelming!

The second day wore on. And with the westing of the sun, the heat grew less intense. Yet Tod's suffering was no whit mitigated. On the contrary, as night came on, he was confronted with a brisk wind, which grew stronger, retarding his progress. Then, with blasting velocity, it rose and came shrieking over the land. It sighed and surged against the youth, flailing him severely, stinging his face, half blinding him.

The sun withdrew its flame, the afterglow of which left the limitless horizon crimson-flushed. Darkness fell over the world like the mantle of a huge monk, enshrouding the youth in gloom. Intensified the fear in Tod's breast. He shuddered. He dreaded the very thoughts of spending another night out here. And tonight it would be worse. Out here in the pitch blackness, with the whirling, swirling sands and the suffocating heat and hunger and thirst and, moreover, that nameless dread—it was unthinkable, so inconceivable!

Tod stumbled. He could not go on. He was weak, sick and tortured by that ever-increasing, if not unendurable thirst. He had waxed poignantly tired. But rest was impossible. Sleep was impossible. It was almost impossible to live at all!

Crouching low, he shielded his face with his arms, and strove desperately to breathe. And yet, even in his misery, despite his woeful retrospect, the human instinct welled up in him with an urgent desire to survive. He struggled up

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on one knee. He summoned reserved strength. Where the going was not so irregular, he succeeded in crawling a short distance. Presently, on his sightless course, he encountered an exceedingly high and mountainous dune. He attempted to climb it . . . and fell back. He tried again . . . and slid down part way. Still, it came over him — though he knew not why — an irresistible urge to conquer that one last formidable dune . . .

The wind swept wide the landscape, leveling off mounds, piling them up elsewhere, shifting and drifting the countless sands. At intervals it would die away, only to rise again with increased velocity. From time to time a powerful gale would undermine Tod's struggling feet, force him back a way, thus rendering his efforts almost futile. And always the slithering sand would lash him in the face. Then the tears would gush and wash away the dust and the invisible grit from his eyes.

At last, however, it occurred to him to choose a zigzag course. Thus, and by digging strenuously with all fours, he succeeded in reaching the summit.

Verily he was about spent. He sank face down, panting, gasping for breath. A long moment he lay prone, cringing with fear and shame and despair — tortured in both spirit and body. But, again, as if summoned by that same irresistible spirit — a power that was infinitely stronger than his own will — he struggled to his knees. A few more feet he crawled. As one in a daze — he attempted to gain his feet . . . but he was too weak. He reeled. Toppling forward, he rolled all the way down the

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steep embankment . . . to lie inert upon his back. His features worked inanely. He mumbled unintelligibly.

Then — with his face upturned to the ashen sky — he cried out in mortal agony: "*Oh, dear God! Hast Thou forsaken me?*" Seconds later he swooned.

The wind moaned, the sands sailed around and around him; while out of the night, faintly and from afar, came the melancholy wail of a lone coyote, seeming to bewail his doom.

Death inevitable — grave, stark, inscrutable death had seemed to be his uncompromising destiny. But, strangely enough, although he was wholly unconscious, in the body of Tod Speckles a spark of life still lingered. It were as if that same spirit which had summoned him was striving with him still, administering to his wretched soul.

Thereupon, and while his body remained inert, in a subconscious imaginary state the youth traveled on. And always that tall dark peak was beckoning to him, luring him. Fantastically it loomed before his mind's eye, bold, grim, rugged, yet infinitely persistent. Of its own volition, now, it seemed to be drawing swiftly nearer. And — due to Tod's whirling brain — as the mighty peak came on it rocked and swayed and tottered in uncertainty. It seemed, then, that he was lifted up on wings of the wind, as it were, and carried through space to meet it.

Having reached the foot of the mountain he camped there — in the shelter of an overhanging cliff. Cool, limpid

L O S T

pools, tinkling brooks, and large running streams were at hand. Secure at last!

So it seemed—

In due time he sailed over the mountain. On the other side he made an amazing discovery. Partly hidden in a pleasant grove, where grew also a myriad charming flowers, his eyes beheld a magnificent castle, wherein dwelt a most lovely princess. She beckoned sweetly and spoke to him. Aw! Perhaps here he would gain respite. Perhaps here he would find rest, happiness, peace. He was about to greet her.

However — as it usually happens in dreamland — his dream-castle suddenly crumbled. Also it seemed as though that whole mountain came crashing down upon him, drenching him with its many waters!

Found

WITH a cry of dismay, Tod recoiled! Recovering consciousness, he was greatly consoled to learn that instead of crumbling earth, two very sincere and attentive creatures were poring over him. His sight clearing, Tod blinked wonderingly . . . He beheld an oldish oddly yet sagacious-appearing gentleman and the shaggiest, ugliest, albeit most intelligent-looking dog he had ever seen! Nor was his gurgling and gasping caused by the great mountain streams; but from a drenching the old man no doubt had given him, owing to the canteen which the latter still held at a ready nearness.

"Aw—" exclaimed Tod, taking stock of his surroundings, "I've been saved!" And there was in his voice a hint of disapproval. Thanklessness.

But the strange individual, stroking his stubby, slate-gray beard, seemed to assume an air of indifference at the present turn of events. He knelt there on one knee, his other hand resting fondly on the back of his big dog. The beast was sitting back on his haunches, his rugged head posed to one side with an air of understanding. His dripping tongue hung low out of his mouth, the while he

FOUND

kept up a good-natured wagging of his tail. All in all, he effected an attitude exactly opposite that of his master. Further, he appeared to endorse the young man's every word, as feelinglessly the latter said, "Gosh, I'm — still plenty—weak. Guess—I was almost a—goner.

"But what—I mean however did you happen to find me —to save me? And—where on earth am I?"

The elder man straightened up and Tod could see now that he was extremely tall, lank, lean.

A wry yet knowing smile crossed his face. A weather-beaten brow ribbed up cynically.

"Why should you care? You craved desolation, didn't you?"

"Well—yes! But—"

"Lad," he retorted, "believe it or not, you're still in your skin, out here at Dryland. Yet this place is not quite as dry and desolate as its name implies. The fact is, there's plenty of water here. It's only an abandoned road camp, but there's a well and a bit of shade. I'll venture the shade of this cottonwood affords a better resting place than the hot sandy spot where we found you."

"How long have I been here?" inquired Tod.

"Since day before yesterday."

"You've took care of me all that time?"

"Well—why not?"

"But I'll bet you've been detained. You've stayed here with me when you live somewhere else?"

"Son," the other assured him, "this whole desert country is my home at present. The shelter of my bedroom is a

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great canopy of stars. I am just a wasteland wanderer, and will be for some time to come. Besides other things, the public calls me a philosopher. I call myself a blasted fool. I stayed by you on Abe's account. My dog took a fancy to you." He smiled whimsically. "And I don't mind telling you—your life was saved by a very small margin. It was only the two narrow nostrils of Abe, here, that came between life and death for you!"

The oldish man paused to stroke the animal's head.

"Tell me all," said Tod, tonelessly. "Though I'm not sure that you've done me a favor."

Lost for the moment in deep meditation, presumably the elder man did not hear the youth's last remark, or else his years of ripe experience bade him ignore the same. As he sat musing Tod had opportunity to note how decidedly peculiar in his distinction was he from any man he had ever known. His facial features were keenly cut and cold as marble, the nose pointed, the chin long; the face totally was like a drawn mask, sternly set, with piercing deep dark eyes seeming to predominate all other features, except when he smiled or talked and then the thin lips, coming out of repose—which was seldom—caused the face to brighten. At all other times it effected a half-cynical, half-quizzical and wholly presumptuous expression.

"And," he resumed, unheedingly, "it is most fortunate for you that Abe happened along just when he did." He gave the dog a sound slap on its shaggy head. "I gathered from your spent condition that he didn't discover you any too soon. It was fortunate, too, that you happened to be

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where you were — on the near side of that large dune. Otherwise, with the wind blowing the direction that it was, Abe would not have scented you. We were en route to Yuma. Following the road from Indio to Yuma, we had about reached the sand dunes when all at once Abe bolted. His nose shot up. He sniffed vigorously. Growled. Then, like a thunderbolt, he dashed away to the north. I followed him and found you lying unconscious. The sun was already blazing down, so I got you over here in the shade. It took plenty of water to bring you to — But that's enough palaver at present. Guess you could stand a little nourishment."

Presuming as much, he got to his feet and began preparations for a meager repast. He heaped up some mescratch and chaparral twigs, which he had brought from a goodly distance, and kindled a fire. Then he searched out a can of soup from within his grub-sack.

Occasionally, during the simple preparations, the odd old man would shamble solicitously over to where the youth lay on a makeshift bed, kept off the ground by a protective tarp, widespread. He would ease the coat under Tod's head, or arrange the blankets about him, striving in every way to add to the sick one's comfort.

Meanwhile, Tod's eyes followed his every move. And verily the youth was impressed. He guessed that the man's stern expression, his curt, cynical attitude; together with his garb of rough brown shirt, open at the neck, and his waist overalls, time-worn, bagging over the tops of high, tight-laced boots, belied his finer feelings and a rare, intel-

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lectual something about the man which set him apart from the ordinary. But the pose of him was transgressional, bitter. It were as if, by some twist of fate or fortune, he had been cheated of his birthright. Or, having been created for greater things, had been caught in the maw of modern deluge, swept off his course and had missed his calling. Perhaps, he, too, having been at sea in an existence that was intolerable of his realest self, finally had drifted away from it all to become riffraff of the desert.

Even now, as he attempted to lift a steaming can from the fire, the impatience and intolerance of the man was quite obvious. The can was without a handle and therefore hard to grasp. As he essayed to lift it from the blazing brands, its hot liquid contents splashed upward against the still hotter tin. It sputtered and fumed. And—the hand that held the can was the unfortunate recipient of a seething spray. Wherefore—and without hesitation—he set it back.

"Damn!" he expostulated. "I guess I'll have to handle you like I did my first wife." Significantly he reached in his pocket for gloves. "And was *she* a spitfire!" with a grunt he added.

Having insulated his injured member, he rolled his eyes furiously. Then, with a half-indignant, half-furtive glance in Tod's direction, he lifted the can from the ruddy embers, and started toward his patient.

"Here. Once this penetrates the innermost recesses of your bedridden system, you'll feel like a new man."

While Tod partook of the warm, health-giving broth,

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his attendant left him, remarking that he would now "hash up a hasty snack" for himself.

Upon completion of his camp duties for the night, the old sage approached his patient to become more attentive and communicative to one of his kind than he had been perhaps in years.

"Well, lad, how do you feel?" he inquired, not so coldly. "Shucks—" unprepossessingly—"I'm all right—physically. Still a bit weak is all. But how will I ever repay—"

"Oh, that's all right!" The sagacious one sparred with what he deemed would be forthcoming. "There is really no credit due—except it be to Abe."

Again he stroked the animal's head, simultaneously jesting: "You know, Abe is ever alert and very tolerant." Again that twisted smile. "He's had to be, considering the many years he's stayed with yours truly. I've had him approx—"

It was Tod's turn to interpose.

"No— Don't try to forestall me that way, sir." And, though he bespoke reverence for the old man, there was in his voice a note of bitterness and self-deprecation. He raised weakly to rest his weight on one elbow, meeting the gaze of the elder man squarely. "You can berate me all you will. But you can't fool me with your mock sarcasm. Deep down inside you, you're an old softy." Tod hesitated. When he spoke again, it was falteringly. "It looks like life has done . . . something to you, too."

Then Tod broke down. A tremendous sob burst, un-

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bidden, from his heaving breast! Overcome with humiliation, he dropped his head, as gushing liquid streamed down his cheeks and nose.

Gently, then, the old philosopher laid a weazened hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"Tell me or not, boy," he softly said. "Nothing you can say will make me change my regard for you."

At these kind words Tod lifted his haggard face. And in that moment, while each looked deep into the other's soul, these two men felt closely drawn to each other. There was born a kindred something — a mutual feeling that would abide with them always.

"You are kind, sir," Tod told him. "I do trust you. You draw me in spite of your crusty attitude— My name is Tod Speckles. I am a hunted man. A failure! A coward! And a fool! . . ."

The youth closed his eyes. Widespread fingers combed time and again through his hair. Next his eyes sought the distant horizon as if striving to penetrate the mystery that lay beyond that strange turn of circumstances which had left him in a state of mental torment. And the other, watching, read the pain, and the suffering that was written there in his drawn visage as Tod told his story . . .

On a distant peak a *lobo* howled. Hot coals settled in the campfire, orange-red sparks hissing skyward. Old Abe stirred restlessly. The odd old scarecrow of a man, so versed in the ways of the world, sat very still while the youth unburdened his breast, and his dark eyes grew soft

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with sympathetic understanding as he listened to this young man who had taken him into his confidence.

"You see," Tod concluded, ruefully. "It was not so much the fear of doing time for my hasty act which made me run away; it was mostly that I feared my people, my friends, especially a certain girl friend, would turn against me."

Tod lay back on his blankets. His troubled eyes sought and clung to his companion's face.

"That—" he breathed, heavily—"that is why I'm here. Out here in this God-forsaken place! That is why you found me without canteen or pack—desolate—thirsty—sick!"

The old man was deeply moved. "Son" he stoutly philosophized, "it's what a man's made of and the way he lives henceforth that enables him to survive these trials. Out here in these great and solemn vastitudes—which remain as God made them—one can think; one gets a new lease on life. Solitude—nature is a sort of mediator between God and man, through which, a man, if he be not totally bad, will find his realest self.

"Meanwhile, let me see . . ." His fingers twirling his beard as if for a clue, the sagacious one seemed now to merge wholly unto himself . . . "There would be a dark angel in the setting somewhere," reminiscently he said. "Since the beginning it has been so—a fallen son—a Lucifer to come between right and God's elect." Abruptly then, to Tod he was saying, "The Bishop was quite fond of you, son, I take it?"

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Under this surprise attack, Tod stammered: "Well—I—pshaw, that is—"

"As I supposed." Having divined his answer, the old sage went on without waiting for his companion to finish. "It's the old story—a Bishop and his black sheep . . . saintly father is sorely tried by wayward son . . . Providentially, there comes into nobleman's ken a youth with all the charms, virtue and ideals which are lacking in son . . . Disconsolate father greatly admires the same . . . Which creates jealousy. But listen, lad, even at that you should have stood your grounds. All is well that ends well."

"I know. My religion teaches me that—to stand firm—do right regardless of the consequences. And trust God for retribution. But for once I let wrath and impatience get the best of me. I was guilty of house-breaking to say the least. If I had it to do over, I'd sure do different."

"Of course you would . . . But it's bedtime. It looks like old Abe has turned in already." Then, as he prepared his blankets, over his shoulder he added, "And Tod, just call me Tony. Out here names are of little consequence anyway."

Tony Philosophizes

THE morning of the fourth day after Tod's rescue, he was awakened by the feel of something soft and very damp licking at his face. Instinctively his forearm shot up, cutting an arc in the air toward the spot of disturbance. And, in so doing, he contacted a shaggy head. He felt much stronger so he sat up.

"Good morning, Abe," he greeted.

By way of response, the dog took another quick lap at Tod's face, as vigorously he wagged his short stubby tail.

"Aw. You're sure a likeable fellow," Tod told him. "I'll bet that raggedy-bag head of yours knows things, judging from the all but human light in those knowing eyes. Friendly, too. Look almost as if you could speak."

Old Abe kept up an enthusiastic brushing and licking at his admirer, in his dumb way striving to express his approval. At this juncture his master shambled up to them assuming his usual berating attitude.

"Don't get the wrong idea that Abe is that friendly and attentive to everybody. He just seemed to cotton to you from the first. Which is quite unusual for him around strangers."

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Tod smiled whimsically. "Airedale, isn't he?"

The old man nodded in quick assent. "At least that predominates."

"The largest one I ever saw," Tod further commented.

"Uh-huh. You're not the first to say that. He's endowed with another strain that gives him his size, his bulk, and, better still, his almost super-endurance. And say, he's a regular pack burro. There's great Dane blood in him or something of that sort. That's why I named him Abe. Like Abraham Lincoln, he's not only the strongest of his kind, but he is also the ugliest and the smartest all rolled up in one.

"Abe doesn't butt into trouble. He will hunt anything from a pole cat to a cougar. He's at home on land, and, due to his Airedale propensities, he can take to water like a beaver. He's watchful, obedient, companionable and trustworthy. Although he's as gentle as a lamb, when occasion requires it, he becomes fierce as a wildcat. Like others of his kind he has a steely constitution. He's never sick and seldom tired. He can run like a greyhound. Like the biggest and best terrier that he is, Abe could thrive equally as well in the snow-clad Arctics as he does in the fervid reaches of the desert.

"But come, you're looking like a well man this morning, and I'll bet you're starved."

Manifestly, out of all his spiritual agony, Tod had regained at least one virtue—patience. In the evening of the

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same day, he joined his elderly companion at the fireside, and he sat in a posture more at ease, less in torment.

"It's strange—" he spoke more to himself—"strange indeed how life or fate or . . . surely it is not the Almighty who plays such queer jokes on a man . . ."

Ensued a brief silence, wherein Tod sat stewed in deep cogitation.

"Well," amiably, "I sure crave elucidation."

"Tony, it's strange I say—I mean the way that some very ambitious people are held back from doing the things they've always wanted to do, such as working at a worthy cause. While others who are virtually indifferent to life's meaning and mission are permitted to pursue their different ways, unmolested, and with ample means. Virtually speaking, they are done; so far as usefulness is concerned, but they are permitted to go on—just being done."

Tod's companion was not inattentive. "I know what you're driving at, son," he said. "But I take it that you are sadly discouraged. Boy, you've been driven by poverty, by treachery and by taunt. Still, there's no telling what the future might hold for you."

"Future—aw! . . ." Tod's eyes passed over their camp out into hazy shadowy distances. Openness! "Although I am becoming somewhat reconciled to this solitary existence—this strange land of voidness; it wouldn't hold any future for — one of my kind," he deliberated, ironically.

"Don't take it so—so hopeless-like, son. Your being out here is not as bad as it might seem. I'm maintaining—the desert is not the worst place on earth, for all its terrible

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moods. True, one finds hardships. Loneliness. Formidable foes. He will be tried. He will be tested. Yet he must fight. He must be true to himself—if he would survive . . . ” Self-depreciation obviously marked his abrupt pause, while the following ran through his mind—and bitter heart: In the long run he will learn that he has not lived wholly in vain. Rather, he will find that he is fulfilling a worthy purpose.

Wherefore, as the strange old philosopher resumed speaking—after an affected pause—the youth saw and thrilled to the light of inspiration in his deep dark eyes. That same hint of wistfulness was manifest and Tod was deeply moved. Where . . . when had he seen that same wistful expression in another face?

“In a way of speaking, the desert is a great vat or melting pot, son,” the other was philosophizing. “It is the nation’s refiner, into which many souls are eventually drawn. These souls are sifted and shifted and boiled down until the scum thereof is eliminated. The desert with its wills, its wiles, its sweltering heat and beguiling mirages will bleach the bones of the weaklings; yet temper the strong in its grim testing furnace, that only the genuine may survive to fulfill the purpose of the great Creator.”

Caught in the foils of his own earnest mood, the old desert sage ceased speaking for a brief interval and grew thoughtful. Then, facing his young companion abruptly, he asked the direct question—“Do you really hate the desert, son?”

Under his searching gaze, Tod flushed. “Why—why

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no," he answered, hesitantly. "That is—shucks, I guess all this untamed land did scare me at first. But," he quibbled—"the way you put it—the way you philosophize it so earnestly makes me feel rather curious and—well, uplifted inside. Still, I can't feature myself out here for very long. It just isn't the proper setting for—for the sort of career that Mother and I have always dreamed would be mine."

The old philosopher took from his vest pocket, filled, and began to pull moodily at, his "brier."

"What is this calling you have in mind, that you deem of so much importance?"

Tod shrugged and with a boyish smile answered. "I hope I don't seem impertinent, sir. But Mother and I have both hoped that I would someday be of great service in our religious system. Personally, I've always wanted to educate myself so that I might be wise enough to refute the inglorious theorizing of a noted writer, who has used his talent trying to damn the faith and practice of my people. I'd like to paint the truth to him. Not, necessarily, because he can in any way stir or disturb the members of our church. But he prevents many on the outside from embracing the truth— It's an enormous undertaking to do it tactfully, but those are my dreams, sir."

"Yes—I've had my ideals, too—but I've also had my fling at modern madness," the other stated, sardonically. "They don't mix . . . Night clubs, cabarets, beer parlors, wild parties—such dives are vilifying—a soul-contaminating curse to humanity! Not many can taste of it and come away spotless."

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"That's where our auxiliary organizations come in, sir," Tod said eagerly. "Their aim is to uphold the higher standards of morality and cope with such character-destroying vices, especially where youth is concerned. Yet our people are accused of being fanatic, radical, immoral, narrow and misled."

He sighed longingly, yet with fervor. "Gosh, I'd like to tell those who fight against us—oh, I'd just like to remind one writer of a few words of a great modern seer—'As well might man try to stop some mighty river on its decreed course toward the place of its infinite meaning or to turn it upstream as to attempt to frustrate the works of the Almighty.'

"You know, Tony, in the history of our own America is recorded the life of one, a great statesman, and candidate for presidency who thought to popularize himself in the eyes of his countrymen by flaying the Latter-day Saints who, at the time, were a much persecuted and down-trodden people. A very eminent leader of my people predicted that if he raised his voice against the Saints he would fail in his campaign and incur the vengeance of a just God upon him.

"The great statesman and orator did not heed that warning. So he did fail. And he died a broken-hearted man."

At these words the odd old sage with the ungainly soul squared about to confront his young companion. His interest had suddenly become acute.

"Where did you say you hailed from?"

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"Garvina, Mexico. It's a Mormon settlement."

The presumptuous, half-cynical and half-quizzical expression became at this juncture even more pronounced as he further questioned: "Tell me! Who—what writer do you mean was the instigator of such evil, such fallacy against your people?"

"Bane Gray."

"Bane . . . Gray!"

Instantly the brier-like pipe sagged almost out of the odd and twisted mouth, ashes spilling on its owner's hands and clothes, causing him to suddenly brush at himself, furiously. As suddenly as a gust of wind will extinguish the open flame of a candle, so the warm light of geniality went out of the old philosopher's eyes. And, for long, he spoke no further word.

Once more that heavy silence predominated at the fire-side. Even old Abe sensed the foreboding intensity of the ensuing moments. At such times, almost invariably, he would keep a quiet yet watchful post at his master's feet. But just now he stirred restlessly. Lifting a shaggy nozzle off the old man's boot-toe, he crept restlessly, stealthily about, whining mournfully. Several times he circled his master's legs, presently to crawl toward the youth. Upon reaching the latter, the beast rested his noble head on Tod's knee, fixed his eyes on the youth's thoughtful face, and wagged his stubby tail in sympathetic understanding. It seemed that Abe had taken unto himself another charge as an additional if not permanent responsibility.

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"Good old fellow," said Tod, heartily. He patted the scraggy head affectionately.

Then to the master: "I trust I haven't bored you."

The elderly man cleared his throat. "Ah—I was just meditating on my misspent past! I was just thinking!" He evaded with a burst of bitter philosophy. "Anyone would be great who greatly asserts himself.

"You say that *you* are in a false position, son, and yet, life is seldom what it seems. Life is always bigger and better than what men suspect. It is never meaningless. It is never wrong. It is only that man's outlook is sometimes hazy. We, in our narrow conceptions, in our puny strivings, and in our insignificant spheres, are so apt to underestimate—to misinterpret the scheme of things. As we skid along through life we are inclined to pass up many and invaluable opportunities; whereas we should seek, without overmuch anxiety, to make the most of each passing day as we tread the path of what seems an unpromising destiny."

Thus the strange embittered man assumed once more the air of one whom nature had chosen to place upon one of the most lofty pinnacles of service to humanity, yet who—through ill fortune or ill conduct—had forfeited his chance for exaltation. And he seemed to divine in the young man, whom he had so providentially chanced upon and rescued, a future prospect for that which he himself had somehow failed in life to be.

"My boy," he was saying, "with your ideals you hold possibilities of becoming one of our greatest contempo-

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rarities. But mark you—I said you must greatly assert *yourself*—your realest self! Take my own experience now.” His voice seemed to rumble up with more volume from some unguessed depths of his sunken chest, as he proceeded to relate his strange story for the first time in many years. “At one time in my life I was so set and settled in my own narrow views, I failed to discern the evil that was encroaching upon my supposed well-made plans for a great career. Whereas, with undue selfishness and without consideration for the feelings of others, I endeavored to link into my chain of untoward affairs my entire household. My first attempt at matrimony was a total failure. Having no consideration for my family, my second wife left me after a very short period of married life. I was right in my views, undoubtedly, while they were wrong—as I saw it—they were radically wrong. You see, I couldn’t stand popularity; it went to my head like sweet wine . . . Briefly speaking, I fell in with the wrong crowd and brought shame upon my entire family.

“In my wayward willfulness, I planned my son’s vocation. He resented my choice and took to drinking. As a matter of tragic truth, strive with him as I may, his life ended in a drunken brawl. His mother, who had always had poor health, was, I fear, hastened to her grave by reason of a broken heart. That left only my daughter and myself. My baby girl was a lovely creature. She was both beautiful and clever. She was now my pride and my only joy.”

Looking away the old man seemed to wax very humble.

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And there was a softer note in his voice as he continued: "But I was determined that she should know everything. I hounded her with books and literature. I loved her dearly, but I was too strict. I had great ambitions for her. I forced her to study too hard. I kept her in too close. And she, being of a nature quite vivacious, at a very early age left me flat—to go live with her Aunt, my sister. She always resented me, too, because of the way I wronged her mother. It was my fault. I should have been more tactful, more patient—and altogether more kindly with her. That—" he deliberated—"is only a part of what I have had to bear because of my willful waywardness."

The last words were spoken, apparently, to the old dog who now stood looking up at him, seeming to express, with slow-wagging tail, an understanding of emotions that could not wholly be put into words.

Tod, who up to this juncture had remained very quiet, now asked:

"Did you ever see your daughter again?"

"No," sadly, and in the same key of sarcasm.

"And so—" The old man inhaled deeply—"steeped in memories of the past, I might unravel indefinitely. But come, old Abe is getting restless. He thinks it's time to turn in. Besides, I must leave for Yuma in the morning, and I want to get an early start."

Meditatively absorbed, Tod voiced no reply, but he responded readily enough by rising immediately and starting toward the bed.

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Whereupon, as the men bade each other goodnight and rolled each into his separate blankets, old Abe, as if keyed to the occasion, sat back on his haunches, pointed his nose at the moon, and howled out their wanton woes.

Fantasy

SOMETIME during the night Tod's slumbers were disturbed by a horrible nightmare. He seemed to have fallen victim to the prince of devils, who had made of him a slave or accessory to his evil and seductive designs. At the point of a javelin, old Beelzebub had forced him to go out and replenish his harem.

Tod set forth in quest of a female beauty, sorrowful, ashamed, yet fearful lest he should fail, and, thereby, bring upon himself swift destruction. His way seemed dark and tortuous. He was beset by numerous obstacles. He became lost. He suffered both mental and physical torture. Now it developed that he was approaching a high mountain. Once again that same jagged peak loomed fantastically bold, grim, and foreboding before him, luring him on as before. Tod obeyed. Then at last he reached its sheltering cliffs. He rested here for a time, and quenched his thirst at a cool amber pool. Presently he journeyed around to the other side of the mountain, where he found once more the beautiful castle in the grove. And, as before, he was greeted by the same charming princess.

She beckoned to him, but reluctant to betray her—whom

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he greatly admired—Tod dropped his head and did not respond. She called to him; pled with him. Still, knowing that he must soon bear her away to his lustful master, he held back. Now he was sure he could never deliver her to such a fate. In desperation, he turned resolutely away. He must flee—flee to the utmost bounds of the earth!

Alas—however—at the moment he made this resolve—just as he made his first mighty bound, old Beelzebub stood before him, leering at him, baring his way, while at the same instant Tod recognized his arch-enemy in his true colors. With violent start of consciousness, with fearful uncertainty, he jerked himself up, muttering in fierce apprehension: "Dunc—Duncan Huff—my tormentor!"

Blinking wildly, Tod peered about him. But nothing was astir. The silence was that of a graveyard. Nothing leered over him. No devilish fiend was there, taunting and grimacing; at least there was nothing tangible.

Only a desert night encompassed him. Only the hissing of night creatures, from their secret coverts, was audible. Tod breathed a long, slow sigh of relief and lay back in his blankets. He had only been dreaming. And yet . . . that shuddering wild rush in his blood still lingered. It was as strange and appalling to him as if he had just encountered living realities. Again that nameless something—the fear of life itself was gripping hard his heart—cold, stark, scrupulous fear was sapping his very strength. How strange it was, too, that the prince of tormentors—the embodiment of his sore misgivings, had appeared in the per-

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son of his adversary, Duncan Huff! . . . Yet not strange.

True, he reflected, Dunc was a cad. There had never been any friendship between them. And he, Tod, had been the dupe. As far back as he could remember he had fallen victim to the pranks of his arch-enemy. Dunc had tricked him, bullied him, and belittled him before those of his set.

Tod shivered. And though he was not cold, he got up and rebuilt the fire. For long he sat brooding over it, a grim, gaunt shadow of his former self.

For the third time, then, the girl of his dreams came back to him. And this time he recognized her . . . It had come—the time in his life when he was forced to admit to himself that his heart was yearning for her—for Cula Payne.

In the grave, pallid heart of the dying fire he saw again that lovely face and was impressed by her charming smile and velvety eyes. He sat dreamily absorbed, with moistened eyes gazing at the golden embers, as if striving to pierce the veil of mystery which seemed to enfold him.

Then there came to him—a presence, seemingly! Tod felt it. That same invisible yet almost tangible spirit which had lent strength to his feeble limbs! Out there, when assailed by the flailing sands, this power had bolstered him, and later had miraculously saved him by sending to his rescue, it seemed, two devout and merciful friends. And now this same power—this spiritualistic Something was lending him comfort. It surged over him. It pulsed in his veins. And somehow peace came, temporarily, over his lonely heart.

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At the same time the face in the firelight changed. It seemed to grow older, braver, firm and more enduring. Then the recognized face of his mother smiled reassuringly. Her lips moved in a prayer for the salvation of her despairing son.

Tod marveled at the change that had come over him. Under the spell of this glorious influence, the entire world seemed suddenly brighter. He returned to his bed, stretched flat on his back, and gazed up at the brilliant heavens. It was the same as before he had left his bed a few hours ago. It was a typical desert night, clear, dark, solemn and whisperless. And yet, somehow it was different. An infinitude of star-fired sky arched over him. Only a thin distorted moon tipped the horizon, but it shone ever so bright and lustrous it seemed. The sky waxed bluer. The cool air was sublimely invigorating. Even the silence was soothing to his roused spirit. Yet, best of all, Tod could think now, clearly, correctly, constructively.

"Aw-w-w, Mother, I see it now!" he cried out, toward the heavens above. "I must not waste away my days in uselessness. I must not wander about always—a hunted, haunted fugitive from justice. You were right—positively. I should not have run away. I must return and live down my mistake."

Friends Indeed

THE hour was still early morning and the old man, upon rising, was greatly surprised to find that Tod had risen ahead of him.

"Ah-huh!" he exclaimed, by way of greeting. "So you're up before breakfast? And," he added, after spending a scrutinizing, rather quizzical look upon the youth, "you sure look pert this morning."

"Yes," smilingly. "I feel okay. In fact," said Tod, "I believe I'm able to travel."

"Young man, you don't mean to risk a trip to Yuma?"

"I sure do," assented Tod. "That is—if you don't object—I'll be stringing along with you."

"Well—now—" the old desert sage shook his head—"that's a bad resolve, son. I dare say you're still a mere shadow of your former self. You'd be strong enough to walk a ways, but it's still midsummer. It's going to be hot as Dante's Inferno, and it's several days' journey from here to Yuma. You would do well to stay around here and take it easy for another week, lad. I can bring you what supplies you'll need."

FRIENDS INDEED

Tod felt grateful to his companion, but he was not readily dissuaded.

"No—I—" Agitated by the pathetic rasping of his own voice, he hesitated.

"Preposterous! Travel is just bearable for well men and beasts in such desolation, at this time of the year."

The kindness and compassion combined with that nameless power invested in the old sage broke down some of the fortitude Tod had previously summoned. "But I should—Tony—I should chance it. I can't remain an outcast," he burst out. "I am going back home to live down my mistake. I must not hide forever in the desert, away from people and all activities. After all, it simmers down to the question of what is honorable and right."

"My boy, I certainly admire your spirit. Still, are you sure of yourself—are you not acting a bit hasty?"

"Well," thoughtfully, "it came to me last night, very imperative—that I must go back and face the music sometime."

"Oh—how I envy you, lad," came the wistful response. "But you don't need to leave right away. Old man desert has been the setting for the re-creation of more than one fallen soul. And remember those who have made mistakes and have had the courage to make a comeback often become great men in life."

While they talked, Tod helped his companion get hurriedly through the ordeal of a simple morning meal. After which, he watched with no small interest the way that old Abe was converted from a watchdog into a pack

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animal. Abe seemed willing enough to carry his share of the camp supplies, and he appeared to be more than anxious to get started. Sniffing and panting, he would throw his shaggy head from one to another of the men in a gesture of eagerness, at intervals to whine outright with overmuch enthusiasm.

"Stand still, old boy, and we'll soon be off." Then to the youth: "Better not let Abe know your intentions or he'll likely pull you limb from limb trying to hold you back. For, strangely enough, he seems to take pride in a certain ownership that he feels toward you." And the old man's voice trailed off querulously.

"Aw—shucks. I don't know . . . Guess I *will* stick around for a spell," at length Tod concluded. "I'd like to see the coast before I leave these parts, too. Besides —" his voice was humorously keyed to the tones of his companion as he added—"After all, I couldn't part with Abe right away."

The old sage smiled his approval.

Weeks later: A queer looking trio of weary, wordless travelers, plodding along. A panorama of barren distances. Silence. Sand dunes. A hazy, brass-hued horizon. And a blazing sun above.

At last the seemingly interminable reaches of blanched and barren sands gave way to a sloping stretch of desert vegetation, temporarily relieving the monotony of the landscape.

At this juncture, the old desert sage halted. And, as

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Tod glanced up, he detected a tremulous wavering, both in mien and manner of that aged body—a quiver that ran over his entire lanky frame. He essayed to speak, but for some strange reason words failed him. A wonderful powerful passion radiated from his deep dark eyes. His gaze swept wide the desert vastness. He cleared his throat. And, in those ensuing moments of revelation, Tod felt again this man's power of vision, his intellectuality and the strength of his character, odd, extraordinary, strange. How vastly different was this man from himself, yet how strangely harmonious were certain of their emotions. And thus Tod felt stealing over him a pang of regret that he was soon to be separated from his friend and benefactor.

"... Poor, creeping creatures," the old man was saying, "their homes have been disrupted, or, broken up and destroyed 'like a ravished bed of ants.' And like ants, such wanderers crawl over the desert and become separated from their kind. Each one harboring a secret sorrow. Each has his woeful retrospect and his separate reason why he roams the wastelands. Yours, my boy, was fear. Mine was forgetfulness. Some of these wanderers are bandits—desert vultures seeking for easy prey. Some are adventurers. Others go in quest of freedom. And many are in quest of gold.' But the strange part of it, lad, is the fact that few of them find that for which they seek; comparatively few ever find gold or freedom or vengeance with which to gratify their lust. And yet, they all—all—according to the merciful plan of the great Creator —

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find something different — something infinitely greater than that for which they seek. They find their realest selves. Yet some will not cherish the same. Most all of them find God, yet few of them heed His promptings."

Still pondering the mystery, the vastness of it all, Tod remained silent for some moments. Then he quite huskily remarked: "I'll never forget your philosophy, Tony. And I'll always remember the kindness you've shown me."

Whereupon, the trio which appeared to be so different from each other; and yet, which had so much in common, journeyed onward. And the old man was thinking, perhaps, of life's many and intricate meanings. The youth, also, became dreamily absorbed. It would seem that, after all, he was fascinated. Perhaps he, too, was yielding to the enchantment of those measureless vastitudes which stretched away before him. Those illimitable reaches! Those bronze, mauve and purple distances were perhaps beckoning to him, urging him, luring him with all their stern, compelling magnitude, impressing upon his soul a feeling of sublimity, strange, mysterious, unknown!

Modern Madness

SUFFICE it to say that Tod's trip to Yuma was not nearly so painful as the one he had experienced several weeks previous. His sojourn in the great unknown not only had afforded ample time for quiet constructive thinking—wherein he had looked deep into his soul—but also he had greatly improved physically. He was tanned and tawny as an Indian. Further, he was his usual lithe and light-hearted self, with optimism.

Then had come the valediction: A simple yet fervent handclasp. Smiles of mutual understanding. At which time the old sage had produced from somewhere on his person several bank notes of goodly denomination which he graciously offered to his young friend. "Here, my boy, is a token of our short-lived yet enjoyable friendship."

Tod tried to refuse. "I wouldn't want to take it from you, Tony."

But his rescuer had stoutly insisted. "Boy, I've got more than I'll ever use. And since you've decided to browse around a bit on the coast before you go home, I want to make it possible for you to glimpse the other side of life without being tied down by work. It is well that you see

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life—raw, sensual modernism." In keeping with this, next he surprised the youth by handing him an envelope, saying, "Here is the address of my sister who, as I told you, lives on the coast. Millie would like a young fellow about the place to drive her car for her."

He gripped hard Tod's hand—"Assert your realest self always—Tod. Otherwise, you'll become as I—only a wasteland wanderlust, in which case hurry back, for I'm sure old Abe, here, will be missing you. Goodbye."

Tod had told him, "My friend, you say such twisty things. Shaw, you make it awfully hard for me to refuse you. Goodbye, Tony. And thanks again for everything. So long, Abe, old-timer, Goodbye!"

And now, as the mighty steam-driven steed—which had clattered along sweltering leagues of Southern Pacific railway—arrived at the Union station in Los Angeles and, with screech of brakes, shuddered to a hissing stop, Tod found himself wondering if he had not made another grim mistake. A strange voidness was in his breast. A great thickening in his throat! He half wished that he were back among the sand dunes with Tony and the friendly beast.

Stepping stiffly from the train, he moved along with other travel-worn passengers. Forward and down through deafening subways he followed the crowd en route to the waiting room. Now could be heard the doleful donging of the reception bell. Clang! Clong! Clang! Like the sounding of a death knell, thought Tod, as he rounded a corner of the tunnel and bent his plodding

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steps up the long incline approaching the ante-room. Nor was his foreboding in the least mitigated by the jostling, murmuring throng which his eyes now beheld: A massive maze of human faces—perhaps threescore pairs of peering anxious eyes! . . . all straining to catch sight of some particular new arrival upon which to lavish kindred welcome.

Tod sighed regretfully. There would be no one here to greet him. No friends. No loved ones. He was thinking that after all the desert was not the loneliest place in the world.

He shouldered his way through this now hubbub of gushing, embracing, if not weeping humanity. Anxious to make his escape he completed the gangway and crossed the reception hall, to enter the waiting room proper. He was the very symbol of dejection as he passed through the spacious room, and when, rounding the ticket office near a front entrance, he all but collided with a smallish weazened yet youngish woman, luxuriantly dressed.

His unassumed air of indifference was demolished instantly by her screech of "Say you! Why don't you watch where you're going?"

Tod stammered his "I'm sorry, madam." And essayed to pass on.

Perhaps it was his mildness of manner that inspired her to call after him. "Wait!"

He felt her hand upon his arm. He turned again to see her critically scanning him, unblinkingly.

"At second glance I think I discriminate— You certainly

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strike me as being the rural chap I was supposed to meet here and take home with me. Did you arrive on this morning's train from Yuma? And is, by any chance, your name Tod Speckles?"

Tod stood nonplused, but managed a polite: "Why, yes."

"Come then. This way."

Without further ado she ushered him out through double-acting doors to the station's rambling portico. Here, the babbling din waxed verily, to Tod, repulsive: Lusty-voiced news-criers, yellow-crested "cabbies" yapping for victims, to say nothing of the whir and roar of motor vehicles and the clang and clatter of street cars at the tri-way intersection beyond.

Tod faltered in his stride forward. His next reaction was to gaze in wonderment. Due, partially, to his present mental state, surely the bedlam at this juncture could have had no less of a disquieting effect upon the rural youth were it actually a pandemonium of maddened humanity, wild yells and blasting six-guns, as of former days.

Tod's companion beckoned toward the curb, and, forthwith, an impudent cab driver sallied forth and literally wrested the youth's bundle from his grasp.

"Right this way, bud."

Looking thanklessly after him, Tod hesitated. He considered all this rather an intimate intrusion. But, at least he had someone to talk to now.

After the "rush act," once they were comfortably seated in the rear seat of the yellow and black cab and were

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speeding across Central Avenue . . . now along Fifth Street toward the business center, Tod's abductor waxed more communicative, quite repentantly so.

"You'll pardon my seeming lack of cordiality, but the truth is, I'm all around late this morning. Last night's party wore on to an unearthly hour. And oh! I have such a popping headache. You know—cocktails, dancing and petting? Youth—irrepressible youth! It was one of those things . . ." By way of gesticulating expression, with an unruly hand she was waving wayward nothings.

With startling abruptness, though, she ceased that, and her chatter, to side glance critically at her companion. "But you wouldn't know." She sighed resignedly. "Young man, why did you wish to come to Los Angeles at all?"

As though he feared he might come in contact with, and perhaps soil her scant coverings of florid blue and filmy white, he, having recoiled, was even strenuously crowding the upholstering at the far side of the seat from her. Despite that he had stopped long enough in El Paso, on his hasty retreat from the mountains, to purchase what he had proudly deemed "store clothes," Tod's attire still appeared out of place beside her fashionable stripplings.

"I—we—that is, Tony and I thought it would be a good thing for me to get a glimpse of city life—society."

"Uh-m. Well, I'm Anthony's sister, Millie Black," came the tardy introduction. "Anthony told me all about you in a telegram. Requested me to come for you, just to make sure he didn't lose you, I suppose. So, you see, you certainly lost no time getting yourself into society. Tell me,"

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she tartly mused, "do you always make your debuts as suddenly?"

"That *was* stupid of me," Tod stated, in all humility.
"Oh, forget it."

Presumably his utter lack of effrontery had gained him favor in her sight, for she continued to talk freely; and before long they two were conversing easily enough to have been taken for old acquaintances. Perhaps, too, it was because the quiet, unassuming youth had appealed to her with quite the same frankness that was characteristic of him, whereas he had completely ignored her own blundering onset from the first. She readily enough accepted him on this basis. Had he in the least presumed otherwise, she would not have hesitated to chill him with snappy reference to their social distinction. As it was, she discerned in him a quiet nevertheless innate chivalry back of his shyness, divining in him nothing more than a simple-hearted boy who seemed greatly in need of an outlet for his pent-up feelings. By the same token had a forlorn and friendly puppy chanced to come her way she would have been disposed to pet it.

"My home is in south Los Angeles about as close to the waterfront as I could build and still be inside the city limits. We might have gone a shorter route, avoiding the uptown traffic," she explained, "but I thought you, like most visitors, would be anxious to view the metropolis."

The following moment they were turning left into a deep sheer-walled canyon flooded with urban madness,

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which Tod's companion announced as "Broadway." Yawning from its echoing north-end tunnel-mouth, Broadway ran south, curved, mingled its flood of brass, glass, steel and humanity with the tangled and intricate maze of traffic from at least four other streets—all of which ran together at and near its ten hundred block: at this junction these roaring two-way traffic streams ran off Broadway, Broadway Place, Spring, Main and Olympic Streets to converge, interlace and not infrequently clash, reminding Tod of a ravished bed of ants; each weaving its separate and maddened way in such a tangled mass as to befuddle the brain of anyone who might be looking down at them, striving to segregate their different courses. And it might here be said that the mountain-bred youth, could he have thought of the littlest excuse, would gladly have chosen to get out and walk to his destination, however far the distance.

All at once, above the din, the rush and rattle of it all the unearthly screaming of a siren was heard to be approaching from somewhere northward . . . constantly sounding louder, closer.

"Another poor fool about to take his last ride," Tod's companion remarked.

"Is that an ambulance?"

"Oh yes."

As if by magic the traffic came to an abrupt stop, the many vehicles crowding together in an effort to flank the curbs, and thereby avoid the oncoming ambulance.

One, however, a chattering old flivver which rightfully belonged to a former generation, getting out of control of

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its addled driver, slithered over and sideswiped their taxi with a screeching—bang!

By this time the ambulance passed by at a blood-chilling nearness, slowed, sheered right, turned a corner onto Ninth Street and once more went shrieking.

That over with, the operator of their cab sprang out with surly mien to accost the man in the flivver.

"Holy cripes! What ya tryin' ta do — park that old struggle-buggy on my fender?"

In time the oldish driver righted his vehicle to swing away from further trouble. He did, however, afford opportunity to tell the cab driver "Aw—go s-wat your under-wear!" The latter was furious, or, at least assumed as much. Making as if to pursue his adversary he strutted forward, shaking his fist, simultaneously shouting.

"I'll catch up with you and bust you yet! I'll lift your stooped face, you d— nitwit!"

Tod's companion said through the speaking tube, "How about giving *us* a lift—homeward."

As they ground roarously away Tod again recalled:

Modern madness! Already Tony's pet words were being impressed upon him. For this was a fair sample of it, indeed.

After a bit more bluffing and blustering, daring and dodging—weaving here and there through the traffic with ever the yellow cab seeming to pursue the smaller vehicle, the cab driver eventually turned them sharply west off the main "drag"—much to Tod's relief. The driver was probably just as relieved, despite his huffy bit of play at

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melodrama. For it is to be doubted if he desired to catch the other car in the first place. And Tod could not help thinking—how like two youngsters playing at tag were they, the only difference being that these foolhardy drivers had trifled with at least four human lives.

"Young man, can you drive?" screeched Tod's companion, as the swerving cab righted to position so sharply as to all but wrench her off the seat.

"Well, I thought I could," Tod answered. "But out here—"

"If you couldn't hold your head better than our present driver," she flurried on, "I'd certainly be disappointed in you."

"Up 'till I left Garvina, I never seen more than two or three cars. The Bishop owned one. He let me learn on his old bus," explained Tod, "but driving these late models in the traffic, I don't know if I'd dare tackle it right away. You own one don't you?"

"Oh yes," sharply.

"Is yours a gear shift?"

"Oh yes. But it's the standard shift." Tod looked uncertainly at her, puzzled by the repetition of it—that tart "Oh yes" of hers. But then, it fitted well the rest of her makeup. So he dismissed from his mind any further disturbance of it. "If you can do that shift," she was saying, "you can drive any model equipped with it."

"Shaw, I guess so, after I've puttered around a bit. Still, I guess it would be awhile before I'd feel to venture out into the thick of the traffic."

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"Oh sure! And don't worry—" her retort was—"you'll have am-ple opportunity. It will require considerable puttering to get *my* car in shipshape again. You see, it has been idle so long, I suppose all the tires will leak, and it will need polishing and greasing to say the least. In the near future I'll let you drive it down to the station and have it serviced throughout. There's not much traffic that far out."

Once out of the mid-town traffic, the remainder of their trip across the residential district was completed in short order. Squawk of brakes, and the cab came to an abrupt stop before a large dwelling which was typical of the type belonging to the current generation. Yards of living green terraced up to a spreading lawn, which was bisected with a concrete walk leading—bloom-and-shrub bordered—between spreading fan palms, to the patio. The house proper was one of those smart, elegantly-constructed Spanish stucco dwellings, built by some fly-by-night contractor who thought more of the almighty dollar than of building himself a worthy reputation, and was designed with more consideration for looks than for durability.

A pudgy Filipino met them at the driveway and escorted them into a living room where Oriental rugs, mohair over-stuffed chairs and lounge, and the very latest if not the most luxuriant drapings fairly boasted of wealth and ease.

But to one of Tod's breeding, the atmosphere of the interior was, generally, not at all inviting. Cigarette butts protruded from ash trays here and there about the room. So grossly impregnated was the place with a rankest stench

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of these and the soul-contaminating alcoholic beverages that the very cushions as he reclined upon them gave off the repulsive odor of the same. A small round tin container, significantly close to the lounge, reeked of an unprincipled hostess, and was only a part of the refuse from last night's party. Of course Tod knew naught of it. Yet, withal, there was impressed upon the Christian-raised youth a feeling of unrest. He considered this a none too healthy atmosphere.

Pick-ups

THE next few days were full and eventful. His hostess had laughingly insisted that she did not expect her charge to do much work, that he was supposed to go places and see things. But he in turn had insisted that he could not be idle for long and be happy. He, therefore, assumed the position of flunkie about the place. And the mistress was surprised to learn how handy he could be both in and out-of-doors. He was eager and willing to tackle any task; but of course being unaccustomed to the built-in features, power implements, devices, time-saving gadgets and the many other elements, together with the pitfalls, which must of necessity be reckoned with in such a modern existence, he made some mistakes which only added to his discomfort.

One morning, after he had satisfied himself that he could manipulate the different levers, foot pedals, gadgets and whatnot appertaining to the mechanism of the car, Tod informed his hostess that he was ready to drive it down to the garage and have it serviced. Then, backing

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the machine out of the garage, he turned eastward, intending to do just that.

He was heading in a general way toward the waterfront, which developed to be responsible for the fact that two hitchhikers, when he was barely three blocks away, thumbed him for a ride . . . And they proved to be not of his own sex.

"Hey, mister, how about it? Give us a lift."

In all innocence and purely out of common interest, Tod slowed to accommodate them.

"That's a pal. Fella, you sure just made a pair of swell pickups," they tittered, as the car rolled to a stop and they literally piled into the front seat, almost atop the driver.

"Say, now," ejaculated Tod, "you girls had better get in back."

"Why?"

"For one reason, I'm an amateur driver."

"And—the other reason?"

"Because . . ." There followed a silence which lengthened until it became uncomfortable for the driver. Tod shifted his position, gropingly.

"Well? What's the matter kid can't you take it?"

Tod flushed. "Listen, you two, whether or not you appreciate it, there's still such a thing as making a 'pickup,' as you call it, strictly from a humane standpoint. I only thought to give you a lift."

He clicked the door open.

"Now. It's too crowded in here, with me driving. So

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you have your choice—either get in the back seat or else you'll have to get out."

"Oh, aw-right— We'll get in the back seat, then."

The one assuming the affirmative was a blondish slender slip of a girl quite pretty in her own type of honeyed slightness, of bold blue eyes and of cheap and laughing gesture. But if Tod had supposed that he would hear no more from her, by merely shifting them to another seat, he was soon to learn otherwise.

"Say, fella, didn't you know this was romance route?"

Her mate piped up with "Naw! I'll bet he couldn't even be chummy. He's a molly, if you ask me."

"He don't look so savage at that, does he?"

"Naw!" Her chum piped up again. "But he can be *bad*—don't worry."

The titter that followed this inglorious remark was significant. And though resentment clouded Tod's face, he accepted it all without comment.

Until presently . . . when he reached his destination he stopped and told them in no uncertain tones "This is as far as I'm going!"

"Aw, come on, hayseed," persuaded the blonde's companion. "We wasn't merely looking for a ride, we wanted a fun-mate, a playboy. Get it? Loosen up. Drive on, to the beach. We'll show you a hot time."

The blonde, looking him over closely, said, "Yeah. What da ya say, kid? I kinda like your type!"

For his answer, abruptly Tod swung the car into the driveway of a garage and stopped. Looking straight ahead

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he observed, "Aren't you girls afraid to be picking up with any fellow who happens along? It must be dangerous to say the least."

Exchanging hopeless glances, the pickups sighed resignedly and got out.

"Look." Blondie seemed very much in earnest. "We live on a *small* scale ourselves. See? Back there in that little joint we just left. And one of our station can't be too choosy. Get it?"

"Shaw. I think I get your meaning all right."

The girls exchanged singular looks again.

"Now we're gettin' somewhere. And you never can tell—" Blondie nudged Tod meaningly—"I might not be such a bad fuzzy at that, and not so hard to take."

Then, turning, they waved. "Toodle—oo!"

"My number," called the blonde, "is HAwthorne —." Winking back over her shoulder she added with a giggle, "Call me up sometime."

The youth did, however, have his last say. As he pulled into the garage with directness he called back—"Don't try 'n' hold your breath until I do."

An Awkward Situation

WITH the unfolding of these what his hostess termed "eye openers," the youth of the mountain sod only waxed the more restless. The weazened little woman of the world had once laughingly told him that he was "too placid." That he must wake up and crawl out of his shell. "Been cooped up all your days, Tod. What you need is a fling at life. Excitement. I'll have the crowd over. You must meet some real people. Get into the whirl of things. Life! Love! Romance! Glamour! That's what *you* need." Thus she felt it her duty to verbally shake him, not to mention her literal attempts at shocking him, out of what she deemed "unsophisticated modesty."

But, to Tod, these petting attentions thrust upon him were deplorable. He turned an icy shoulder toward the sort of social functions which her home offered. And he appealed to her with the same frankness he would have shown toward his own mother, completely ignoring her "sexy" appeal.

"Mrs. Black," he had answered her, "I'm not so sure. You are kind in your way, but I could never be content to

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live like—as you do here. I feel so all cooped up. This place, this kind of existence has no meaning for me."

There was no place for him in the artificial glitter, the rush and fickle affairs of the sort of city society his hostess represented. He could walk for hours, days on end, encounter thousands of people upon traversing the over-crowded streets yet still know loneliness. There was no one who really understood him. No one to talk to or neighbor with. People never spoke to one another outside their own clique it seemed. They impressed Tod as being curt, cold, unbending, if not surly. Why his hostess didn't even know her next door neighbor.

That Tod was homesick, too, was a fact of much significance particularly to the youth. He yearned for the rugged openness of his own mountain home. As the days passed into weeks, his thoughts reverted to the cause which had been neglected through his prolonged stay in an environment that had sown in him countless seeds of discontent. Aspirations as of old once more stirred within his breast. He longed for the little cottage by the creek, to be back in his boyhood home. Just to gaze again upon the serene and saintly face of his mother!

Visions of these and of a certain pair of smiling velvety eyes would register in fanciful, colorful pictures upon the screen of his mind at night; only to be repelled at times by the raspy, loose-mouthed voices of bleary-eyed, bloaty-faced, sensual-minded disciples of Satan in the adjoining room. Voices which were not musical to Tod's ears! Nor wallproof.

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Disconsolation welled within him so poignant and devastating, and become so obvious at times as to rouse in his hostess a pitying interest. Point-blank she, on one occasion, told him, "Tod, either yours is the worst case of homesickness I ever saw, or else you've got a real old-fashioned dose of being in love. Which is it?"

"Maybe it's both."

"Well take it from me, Tod: About the love part, don't lose your head—nor your heart, to no fuzzy. Only a knave or a fool would get all hopped up about any *one* party these days. Folks just don't tie up and settle down any more. As sure as you make any girl, or otherwise, your one and only, you're fixing yourself for a beautiful heart-break. Don't I know! And I'm telling you—make your motto as mine—love 'em and leave 'em! For they're all the same. Whoever your little lovebird is, she'll fly the coop as soon as she spies a greener pasture."

Tod said, very quietly, "I wonder.

"It's not only *her* I'm thinking of." Whereupon he proceeded to confide in the woman concerning his people . . .

"Of course, it's hard for me to appreciate your feelings in this regard," said his hostess, who had reached the point where she was anxious to help him regardless of all else. "I'm anything but churchified, and most certainly not orthodox. But if I had religion as bad as you've got it, I'd seek to locate a branch of my church here. Surely your church is represented in a place of this size?"

"Yes; it is. We have several ward houses in Los Angeles. But don't you see, I'm on the black list. I don't

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know of my standing, and it would be the same throughout the entire organization of the church. Shaw. The only thing for me to do, is—go back home and live down the past."

She sighed resignedly. "I presume as much. In which case, I'll take the time—I'll show you the coast right away. I don't want you to die on my hands. So we'll start going places, seeing the sights. Tomorrow. Then you can hurry on home."

So that was what they had concluded. They planned together. They were going to see the country and, for Tod's sake, get it over with, quickly.

But the next day it rained—one of those fine yet drenching and, seemingly, everlasting showers—so "*rarely*" heard of in the land of "Sunny Southern California." Nevertheless, it rained. And rained! Day after day, night after night thereafter; until that fair section of the country, so famed for its splendid climate, became a dripping deluged horror.

Meanwhile, Tod moped about the house like some caged creature of the great untamed. Weighed between duty and desperation, he was sorely tempted to break the promise he had recently made his odd old friend and benefactor out there on the desert. He wanted to leave without further delay for the only place in all God's great vast world that had ever been home to him—little old Garvina. Yet still he was undecided. Was it alone the glow of newly-found friendship? Or perhaps it was a deeper stimulus which for some strange reason bade him remain

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true to his former conviction. Whatever the reason, it did not prevent his sensing the utter hopelessness of every becoming reconciled to an existence such as engulfed him at present.

And then one dreary morning, which, by the way, was of the third week of apparently undying downpour, something came to pass which hastened Tod's decision. Something that, for the second time in his life, almost blasted away his future, insofar as usefulness was concerned. The weazened female who was so anxious to help her charge, yet whose worldly tactics had thus far left him unmoved, at the present moment was elaborating on a bit of her brother's philosophy. Purposely.

" 'Time has a strange way of mitigating life's little ironies.' Now you take, for example my niece's recent experience—a *very* distasteful thing happened to her. But in time her plightful situation was alleviated. The very same morning I met you at the station, I received a letter from Cula telling me how that she had been robbed of all the money which she took with her, a whole year's allowance that was recently mailed to her by her father. She didn't tell all the particulars. She did say, however, that it was a very sad affair, especially since the young man who broke into the house where she was staying and robbed the safe her money was in was a very dear friend of hers. You see, this was dreadfully embarrassing for my niece who is accustomed to having plenty, and to be left on the mercy of a family whose son she loathed. But it seems that

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a friend came to her rescue in time; Aunt Wealthy, I think Cula said, offered her a room with her."

A wretched look had suddenly clouded Tod's face—an expression that was undoubtedly born of blank surprise. "*Cula? Cula!* Surely you are not talking about Cula Payne—and?"

"Why—yes. How did you know?"

"Know! No—It couldn't be . . ." And in view of this, Cula would be Tony's daughter. No! He stared at her uncomprehendingly—with unbelieving eyes. It all seemed so incredible, so unbelievable! Surely a thing as terrible as this couldn't happen to him.

But it had. The name was unmistakable. The answers she gave to his next few questions verified beyond the shade of a doubt the appalling thing which he fain would disbelieve. Somehow, by some treachery or scurvy trick of ill fortune, Cula had been robbed. And he, Tod, had been the "fall guy."

"Then you are Cula's Aunt?"

She nodded, thoughtfully, wonderingly.

"And this is her home?"

"Oh yes; at least she lives here." And never while the youth had been staying with her had the woman seen his wide blue eyes so tragic-filled and woeful. "I guess that's about the most bitter pill the girl has had to swallow since her mother died," she was saying.

While Tod, as he sat in heart-sinking silence, was wondering what she would say if he were to tell her that he himself was considered responsible for that last bitter pill.

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Worse still, to think that Cula right now was believing that he was guilty of such a low and loathsome act!

For the next few moments he moved about the room as one in a daze. With a vividness that amounted to torture he lived again that experience in the Bishop's house, when he had opened the safe. He was again possessed of that same ominous foreboding which had beset him on that ever-to-be-vividly-remembered moonlight night. His hands trembled. His brain seemed numb. Everything around him had suddenly become so strange, uncanny, unreal! Tod thought he could hear his hostess questioning him. But he was not listening, not even caring. Turning, presently, he caught up his jacket, and, without so much as a single look or by-your-leave he stalked to the door, opened it, and stepped resolutely out into the storm, while she stood gaping and glaring after him.

Nature's Remedy

TOD SPECKLES never knew how far — how long he padded the hard cold rain-drenched pavement that dismal day, heartsick, utterly oblivious to his surroundings. How strange it was, if not providential, that his aimless steps were destined to lead him back to the "Central Station" — that section of the city where formerly that strange feeling of oppression and ominous foreboding had possessed him. Luckily, too, the storm had subsided, temporarily. As though the Gods had looked with compassion upon a despairing soul—one who, in mental throes, had strode blindly at first—heaven had checked her downpour almost immediately after the youth had stepped out-of-doors. But Tod had not thought of the rain. Nor of a drenching and its consequences. He would not have cared if he had. Ignominy, dread and righteous indignation had so completely taken possession of him for a time, mingling their conflicting emotions in his, then, heaving breast!

Conscious of the fact now—that he was once more acting beneath the dignity of his years and principles, he slowed to a more normal gait. He felt like a small kitten, terrified and affrighted, surprised at its platter of milk

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by a mongrel beast who was essaying to pilfer that which was rightfully his. And rather delinquently now, he bristled . . .

That was it! Tod divined another, a master stroke—he understood the full import of his desert dream now, pertaining to the evil designs of his chiefest adversary. In Dunc's dastardly attempts to ruin him, cheat him, queer him with Cula Payne, had he not stooped to the worst?

Tod was positive that he had not taken any money from the safe that night which might have belonged to the girl. He had taken only the one hundred dollars in Mexican "dinero" — the prize money. If Cula's money had been in that safe it would undoubtedly have consisted of American currency or bank notes.

Somehow the evil and crafty Dunc had framed him, made it appear that he had stolen the girl's money as well as the prize money. Tod felt sure of it.

In further consideration of his desert dream, the impression made by the apparition subsequently—that of his mother's face in the fire-light—she had called to the best in him. His mother had bade him be true to his heritage, were it ever so humble. Besides, he had not been entirely destitute of friends. Why there was Aunt Wealthy! It piqued him to think that in his blind haste he had forgotten Aunt Wealthy's words. Had she not entreated him to come to her when in trouble? Aw—Jehovah! He had betrayed her friendship. That alone seemed unforgivable.

Slowly, falteringly he covered several more blocks to Fifth Street. At the corner of Fifth Street and San Pedro

NATURE'S REMEDY

he stopped and waited for a red car to pass. Then he crossed to the other side. Merging once more wholly unto himself, mechanically he moved in the direction of the Union depot. Self-accusation, self-censure and self-condemnation were only a part of his misgivings now. How he regretted that he had left his mother to face the music alone! Beset thus, by remorse and dire regret, Tod loitered aimlessly about for some while. He fought mentally. He suffered spiritually. And verily the atmosphere in this locality was in keeping with his present mood.

Here, at the "slave market"—where loitered, also, the lowborn, the degenerate, the waster and the sloth—filth and failure obviously predominated: A stench of rank tobacco smoke. The pavement splotched and smeared with vile spew. And the gutters fairly reeking the stench of rotting refuse and of dank and slimy sewage.

Humanity moved in sluggish uncertainty, visages haggard and sallow, voices raspy, eyes dull. Briefly speaking, in dress, mien and manner these poor fretful souls displayed an air of hapless hopelessness generally. And from time to time some lousy loose-mouthed drunk would slouch up to a repulsive nearness, leer impishly, "stem" him, and then with jibbering profane slurs would stagger on. How disgusting! Tod considered what these poor creatures needed was food, medical aid, work and a more wholesome atmosphere where they might get next to themselves.

"Nature's Remedy!"

Seeming to summarize Tod's very thoughts this phrase

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had burst suddenly upon his ears. He glanced up to see a soap-box salesman nearby. Beside the enthusiastic agent was a small sign which announced: "Gypsy Joe's Herbs and Remedies."

"Nature's remedy," repeated Tod. Yes—that was it. These men needed nature's remedy. Thereupon he spent the ensuing moments listening to the demonstration.

Brandishing his small container of herbs, the salesman, who, under closer observation, proved to be an educated Indian, was saying: "Your skin is sallow—your eyes are dull—your blood is sluggish. You have lived for so many years in so-called civilization, eating the embalmed food of the white man, partaking of your patent medicines, drugs, dope, and alcoholic beverages that you've polluted your entire systems—dissipated your health. You mope and grope about the streets with that hang-dog expression in your faces. You white men are supposed to be the most intelligent race on earth, but your scientific living has caused you to degenerate. Tell me—" his eyes roved the crowd—"has anyone here ever seen a baldheaded Indian, or a toothless one, regardless of sex or age? Moreover, the Indian has always outlived the white man. So, I say to you again—take nature's remedy and clean out your sluggish systems. This small tin contains a combination of granulated herbs, roots, barks and berries. And I'll guarantee—it will do you more good than all the patent medicines you heretofore have taken. You who are sick, discouraged, dejected—you poor, miserable, scientific creatures of so-called civilization—you who have stuffed yourselves with

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so much coffee and doughnuts that you walk in circles, and are therefore unable to extract yourselves from this scummy place—come: Let me put new life in your veins. These all but magic herbs will clean you up, increase your weight, preserve your teeth and hair, and restore your manhood."

Tod smiled and resumed his way. Presumably this was a racket, but it had served its turn. Perhaps, yet, there was much truth in what he said.

Tod believed that he better understood several things now. Tony's philosophy about the desert and his appreciation for a more wholesome atmosphere for one. Here was a world in and of itself. So degrading a one!

That Cula was Tony's daughter, he no longer doubted. Had he not seen that same wistful expression of hers in the eyes of the old desert sage? Had he not discerned a spiritual restlessness in them both. Not that either of them had at any time sunk to the level of this, the city's slump hole. He was not presuming that. It was only that this bayou — which had gravitated to its filthy and inglorious shores flotsam of the wretched souls whose realest selves had been wrecked upon reefs of bad environment — contrasted so vividly with the sublime atmosphere of his own mountain home!

And so it was that the youth had come to look upon another phase of life. So it was that he had looked deep into his own soul and saw that he had drifted. Already, he felt, he was a long way down the stream of uncertainty and doubt. Would he become as these wretched rudderless

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souls about him—would he become mere human drift-wood, trash and civic scum? Or, did he possess the inner strength to brave the storms on life's voyage—to struggle back to a higher, truer, nobler existence? Abruptly, resolutely Tod quickened his strides. And the fact that it had once more begun to rain was not alone responsible for his hurried gait toward the shelter of the Union Pacific station. He meant to find out how soon a train would be leaving for the south.

Several more blocks, and Tod wove his way through the noisy street traffic of Central Avenue; across to the station side. Still walking hastily, he flung wide a double-acting door to enter once more the spacious waiting room. Progressing along the center aisle between benches toward the train alleys, he went eye-searching the walls for the black schedule-board. So intent upon his objective was he that he failed to see the superb girlish figure of a certain velvety-eyed creature who just now entered the room directly in front of him.

Espying him first, the young lady came to an abrupt halt and waited, eyes glowing, for him to "wake up."

Then he descried her — the girl of his unwonted thoughts—Cula Payne. She was standing there . . . strut-legged, blocking his way . . .

Tod stared wonderingly. Nonplused. That it was actually she, he was slow to believe.

Roguishly she was saying "You're not walking out on me again, young man?"

NATURE'S REMEDY

As yet, Tod said nothing. He really could not give utterance.

"Well, aren't you glad to see me? Or, does my face haunt you?"

Still he could not gain his voice. Her sudden appearance and her mention of his perverse act returned to him the overwhelming realization of all that he had once blissfully anticipated, yet which now seemed hopelessly lost to him. He experienced, besides, a sense of resentment. That she should have come upon him at such a time . . . that she could stand there with such composure! Her smile was superb. But her pose so contrasted his own turmoil of mind as to render her very presence unreassuring.

At length, Tod, answering, said, "Naturally you think me guilty. So I guess there's no use—"

"Oh, Tod!"

Surely Cula Payne read in Tod Speckles' face the intensity of emotion that held him there—so mute and motionless before her.

Stepping aside to avoid the onrush of arriving humanity, she sought out a bench where they could talk in private and beckoned him to a seat beside her. She resumed in sympathetic but decisive tones.

"Of course your sudden disappearance was as good as admission. But *I've* never believed that you willfully took any money from the Bishop's safe, except what rightfully belonged to you." She added: "And you couldn't have gotten mine by mistake, since it was in an envelope addressed to me. Tod, I tell you, the proverbial Nigger—

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is in the woodpile. Frankly, I've suspected Dunc Huff all along. So has Aunt Wealthy. Bless her! I don't know what I should have done only for her. You see, I just couldn't stay on at the Bishop's believing you innocent and suspecting Dunc, while all the time he was berating you."

As one roused from dark abstraction, Tod half raised from his seat.

"Girl, I've got to get back at them. Prove myself."

"Good grief—wait a minute! Tod, I'm glad you see it that way. But, don't you realize—" Her lips curled in pouting appeal. "Young man, I've returned to the States sooner than I expected. Purposely to see you. There's no one pursuing you now; you can rest easy on that score. And retribution can wait."

Tod settled back. "Cula, you mean you wanted to see me again after—"

"Absotively. Posolutely."

"But how did you know where I was? That I was here?"

"A letter from father did the trick. He told me things about you."

"Tony!" In thought Tod went racing back to the desert . . . Why had he done it? No doubt that was the first time father and daughter had corresponded in years. And all because of him.

Cula returned him with, "Aunt Wealthy would be mighty proud to have you go back, too. She was much less concerned about your taking the money than she was over the fact that you left without going to see her."

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"Aw—Aunt Wealthy. And how about Mom; how is she?"

"A bit lonely of course, but seemingly not as troubled as one would expect, considering her outlook."

In a quiet voice Tod rejoined: "No — bless her soul! She is ever so trusting, so patient. I—"

With her abrupt rise Cula said, "Come. For a time you must be content with writing to them. I told them I was going to show you all of Southern California before I let you go. And, oh—Tod! We'll roam and romp and laugh at life together again—yes?"

It was the "Oh—Tod!" that he was to recall later, the thrill of it. Yet ponder the mystery of the same.

Love's Little Ironies

FULL and delightful were the weeks immediately following. To begin with, they glimpsed every noteworthy nook and novelty of that booming world-famed wonder city. Chinatown, the plaza, Angel Flights and Pershing Square she pointed out to him. They strolled through South Park, Westlake, and other principal parks. Browsed in the world's greatest library. Through the adroit eyes of his companion, Tod saw and thrilled to the many objects of wonderment, curios, museum collections, viewed from a writer's standpoint.

Next, the girl acquainted with urban life began to show him the surrounding towns, pleasure resorts mostly. Hollywood and its studios they visited. They frequented the more prominent beaches of Ocean Park, Venice, Pedro and the "Sister City." Manhattan, Redondo—in fact all along the waterfront from Santa Monica to Long Beach, inclusive, numerous pleasure places, fun-houses, playgrounds, ball pavilions and whatnot received a sample of their joyous pulsations.

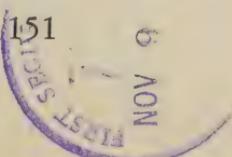
The first and untimely rain of the year having passed, the weather at present was favorable, manifestly the

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season's best, and, insofar as concerned their pleasure jaunts, so continued to the chapter's end. Precisely, too, because cupid held a high hand in the gala game they were playing, more and more the young people began to seek out less-frequented, remote nooks in which to while away unpleasant memories.

And motorboat jaunts! Furrowing the billowy surface of the deep — that *was* of fascinating interest to the mountain boy. A thrill! Rollicking the sand hillocks, between El Segundo and the shore, was no scant joy, for either of them. El Segundo by the sea! Cula had once lived there, and had liked it. Sublimely. She, therefore, knew of all the fun-nooks. And could show Tod them. Surmounting some mountainous wind-swept dune, they would join hands and then—down they'd go . . . half running, half rolling, until the girl would utter a little squeal of terror (which was mostly one of delight). Or else, they'd romp and race and roam the vast expanse of bone-gray beach, of wave-washed silt and sand. With ever the lull from the surf on their ears. Or, the roar of the breakers! Demons of the deep were they. Ranting. Dashing. Roaring.

Then, at eventide the young couple would resort to some placid lake where, companioned by great floating swans—swans as buoyant, bright, and fair as thistledown—they would enjoy canoeing. Or else, sometimes, sculling a "tub" would be their choice. The latter was more roomy, allowing them to sit together, as concerned lovers, when finally they'd weary of rowing. At such times they'd let



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the boat drift to the rushes, in some quiet sequestered nook, where grew also gnarled old pepper trees, whose branches, widespreading, overhung the brink. Here the lovers would cuddle and chat and laugh and—live. Until night's queen arrived to watch over them, spreading a silvery fabric over the surface of the lake. In these moments and while drifting silently along the palm-bordered verge life seemed but a breath—of ecstasy. That seemed ever about to be snuffed out, by ill winds. Strange winds. And winds blowing from afar! In these moments Tod was wont to sit and gaze upward . . . at the shimmering quiver of the palm fronds against the globule of an inexplicable moon . . . And wish that it would last. For ever!

Heart-warming? As of yesteryear?

On this momentous occasion something infinitely more vital to the youth's life and happiness was asserting itself within Tod Speckles' breast. Always it would be an abiding memory—the way that he had once trailed "glory-clouds." Sweet memories! Yet no longer did he dwell in wonderment and doubt pertaining to those strangely fervent stirs within his breast. Gone now were fiction and fancy. Gone all mystery of the same. Now, had arrived the period of yearning—an inexplicable desire for the glory of fulfillment. Romance? Ah! Something deeper, yet, than that. A sublimest something—sang to him in sweet cadences of the heart. The whole truth of the matter was, the exquisitely gorgeous creature, sweetly snuggling here at his side, had inspired him to—*love*. Deeply. Ar-

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dently. Devoutly. And never would he feel more sure of it: That he loved the very pouty little gesture of her appealing pretty lips—that he loved the pert toss of her raven-like head and the pose of it which looked for the world like a spirited young colt, whenever he would cross her will—that he loved the way she dressed her hair, to the very little bow-shaped barrette, set spangled and silvery, which caught back her tresses prettily over one ear and contrasted strikingly with the darkness of her hair—that he admired the way she groomed her entire person, for she always wore her clothes well in proportion with her profile and figure—that he loved to feast his eyes on the moon-mellowed light in her soft velvety ones and try to divine the thoughts which lay beyond.

But always she kept him mystified as to certain of her heart-secrets, desperately so at times. Then at other times she would do teasing little nothings to him which made him feel that his affections might not be misspent. The pure-toned sweetness of her well-modulated voice, too, as just now she ruffled his wavy locks and said, "Fella, would I like to have a kinky wavy crest like that!"

"*That* makes two women, then."

She glared at him.

"I mean that's two women admiringly envious of the same thing."

"Two—what!"

Tod effected his spreading smile. Now he had *her* guessing for a change. Amusedly he followed up his advantage with "You mean, *what two?*"

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"Young man, are you deliberately trying to make me jealous?"

"What think *you*, milady?"

"Well, I'm about to think I let the wrong man bring me canoeing tonight. There's Freddie now—it might interest you to know that only yesterday *he* asked to take me places."

That "slayed" him. "You know," he returned, not without feeling, "the more I see of *you*, the less I think of that fellow."

"Oh Freddie is all right."

"Aw-huh. Maybe that's it. C'm'on, lady, fess' up. Just how much all right is he?"

"You fess up. You started it," she demurred. "Who is the unmentionable?"

"Shucks. If reference to one's own mother doth kindle the all-consuming fires of jealousy in one's own lady friend, then I confess—I'm a heartless trifler with women's affection."

Cula laughed wholeheartedly. "Your mother, eh? Well, that's good. Only I'll take back what I said about the unmentionable. As for poor luckless Freddie, I'll say that he won my everlasting gratitude when he tipped off *me* about Garvina, that picturesque little settlement far away in the mountains, with its 'putative queer people'—including you."

Tod looked at her questioningly. Said nothing. He really could not be sure whether she was confessing her admiration for him or for that dapper dandy. He would

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never have surmised—how was he to know that going on in her pretty head were idealistic thoughts and nuptial secrets, which he himself had inspired. That, moreover, she was dreaming over the prospect of having found a soulmate with whom she might blissfully abide the hallowed bonds of marital companionship beyond the portals of mortal probation. Through all eternity! Nor could he know that it was the blending of moonlight with another and—to her—infinitely more important light in her eyes which just now enhanced his companion's face to infallible loveliness. At the moment, of one thing only was he certain—that he wanted desperately to plant a kiss right on her lovely lips.

Later, upon reaching the house, and not until she had fanned the flames of his desire with her most winsome mood did his longing give place to actuality. It was only a hasty peck on those inviting lips, and yet, owing to its source, who can say that it held any less of a thrill or of pure adoration, at that.

In his thought processes Tod encountered exactly two disturbing elements now. Save for these, which marred the otherwise peaceful waters of his world, he would have been inclined to deem his present status as being akin to heavenly glory, of not a lesser degree. Not to mention his ominous retrospect, this other, this recent thing was one mean menace to his peace of mind.

A menace in the person of one she called friend and "Freddie"—Freddie the ne'er-do-well!

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Tod could still see the light that shone in Cula's eyes when that dapper little dude with striking "pers-o-nal" had stepped from his car to call out "Ah-ha! So you've returned. And utsnay!" He had looked Tod over from stem to stogy, saying, "You sure brought back a wow of a specimen. Fresh from the sticks, eh?" That sport model roadster of his, too—made-to-order, it was built long, low and powerful; in color it was a neatly-trimmed flashy flaming red, designed especially for attractiveness and—unearthly speed.

It had happened on the very day of her arrival, which fact was significant. Tod guessed that Cula was exceedingly popular among her set.

Cula had come back at Freddie with "Same old freshet, eh? Of course you'd have to quack wise." But Tod had felt rather than seen that her smile as she said it had not been in keeping with her words and tone. It had been too wholesome. Too cheery.

"Don't mind Freddie. He's a bit breezy; but he's not such a bad timber at that. He's all on the surface. Mostly bark. Still, beneath it all he's got a big heart. He's one of my oldest friends.

"Freddie, meet Tod."

"Tod of the clods—eh?" Freddie had retorted.

And though he proffered a hearty handclasp, Tod had been ill impressed.

Later Cula had further enlightened Tod about her boy friend dude. "Freddie is the friend I mentioned that day we first met. The one I said told me about your people in

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Garvina. He travels a lot. Knows much about places, people and things. He can talk interesting about them, too. Awfully. He's sure been *my* good stimulant since Momsy died."

But the more she thought to explain, although Tod said little, the more he harbored dislike for the slick-tongued youth of the cities.

Another reason — Freddie's parting shot that day. He had informed them that he was leaving on another of his little jaunts, to be absent for a week or so. "But," he'd told them, "I'll keep both of you in hot liquid when I return." Nor was Tod to forget the "*good stimulant*," meanwhile.

Thus it was that at first Tod and Cula had known romance with just they two—together. But more and more as her friends would learn of her return, Cula's time and attention were attracted otherwise.

For a time Tod knew concern in that Cula dwelt under the same roof with her Aunt and the loose crowd she entertained. Which, to Tod's way of thinking, was a bad environment in itself. It developed, however, that Cula had little in common with her Aunt and her Aunt's social mates. So his mind was relieved on that score. Obviously Cula paid not the slightest attention to any of their dizzy affairs, socially. Instead she not infrequently entertained guests of her own set. And, aside from this and her few domestic duties she spent the greater part of her time at writing. Indeed, Cula and her Aunt lived as separate and extremely distinct creatures. Like a kitten and a cur, abid-

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ing in the same house, they were loved by the same master and were provided with plenty; but there was scant affection between the two. And Tod later learned that Tony, his odd old benefactor, was that master.

The youth longed to talk further to the girl about her strange and aged parent. He was curious about her writings too—beside other things. But he was too proud to "broach the subject," feeling that if she wanted him to know she would offer to tell him. So he remained in darkness, both mentally and spiritually. He was beginning to feel like some odd old vessel about the place, which is noticed only occasionally and kept around just for old times' sake.

Once again a pall seemed to hang between them—between them and happiness. Once, when Tod had made slight mention of this growing icy indifference between them, so quickly, so impulsively had she scoffed at the idea that he had received a shock of apprehension. And what little he did go places with her now . . . there was not that happy carefree feeling between them as of yesterday. The more Tod saw of urban life, the more he learned of Cula's other self it seemed. Albeit, he was careful not to approach her again concerning the same. If at present her mood was tranquil, far be it from his desire to disturb. Moreover, like Dunc, he was careful not to rouse that certain other characteristic in her — the same as had caused Huff dire chagrin.

Just what was it that had happened? What had come between them? Tod asked himself these questions as he

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strolled in the garden one bright midmorning, companioned only by winged creatures of the air. The fact that he still loved Cula dearly, he did not even question. That she had loved him, seemed, in yestermonths, quite obvious. And yet . . . her actions of late, did they not betoken otherwise?

Almost as if in answer to his questions, at this juncture a sharp lilting ta-ta-ta-ta honking rasped on Tod's drums. He glanced up to recognize the dapper young man in his smart shiny roadster. In his thought processes Tod had not held that wiseacre totally responsible for the, seemingly, change in the girl. But here was a bad omen to say the least. And the next moment . . . it was a vivacious and vastly different Cula who dashed across the front lawn to join the young man in the flashy red roadster.

And, in the weeks to come, by way of adding heartbreak to heartache, Tod saw far too much of Freddie the ne'er-do-well. At close quarters.

It was on a Saturday evening that Tod, in the seclusion of his room, sprawled full length across the bed, tab and pencil at hand, was opening a letter, when he overheard Cula's Aunt call "Cu!—your boy friend. Freddie is out there in his car."

A strange tremor ran over Tod, a vaguery as of something sinister. So disquieting was it that the letter which he was about to open crept back into his pocket unread.

"Well: Tell him to come in," Cula was saying.

"I did. But he won't. Says he wants to see you privately, first."

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"Oke. Why in tarnation didn't you say so?"

Tod heard no more for a time.

The magazine Cula had been reading just now went flying. The girl jumped from her cushion, flung open the door and took the steps in one stride, in her anxious flight toward the shiny red racer.

Scarcely ten minutes later Tod was startled by a violent rap on his door. Even before he could rise from the bed the dapper form of Freddie walked in.

"Hi-o, Mexico. What! Scribbling epistles of homesickness already? Well, we'll fix you up. We're stepping you out to a swell dish."

Tod's face flushed, then darkened. He said nothing; but most certainly it was a thankless look that he right now gave the intruder. Inwardly he was seething. Secretly yet none the less fervently he was wishing that by some twist of affairs he might have found out beforehand what was "coming off." He would have managed to be elsewhere.

Perchance sensing the tautness of the situation Cula, who had been donning hat and coat, at exactly the right moment stepped from her room into the hall and called decisively, "Come, Freddie. I'm all ready to go. You can roll in on the driveway while *I* give Tod the low-down."

Presently Tod learned the "low-down," much to his discomfiture.

"You won't mind if we sort of—switch partners tonight, will you, Tod? You'd naturally think from that and from Freddie's prattle that I'm inviting you to a housewarming tonight only out of chivalry or sympathy, which isn't so.

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The truth is, we need your presence. Muchly. Freddie is obligated to furnish a partner for his cousin who is visiting at his home at present. The house to be warmed belongs to a friend of his cousin's, and so, of course she must go. Besides, we want to make it a foursome. The girl is handsome. The place is swell. The time opportune. And, it'll be the greatest party ever. Music, dancing and—what do you say?"

"As I was saying, palsy, it'll be a swell dish," Freddie's voice was heard above the purring of the motor, cutting her short.

"We'll be seein' you later, then," Cula presumed, hastening away without giving Tod a chance to protest.

"Adiós, planter!" Tod's rival accelerated the motor and hummed away in second gear, leaving his opponent helplessly behind.

So that was the way they had worked it. And the worst of it was, Tod had had no choice, not even to decline the invitation. He could understand why a girl of Cula's stamp would prefer a chap like the brilliant Freddie to his slowness. Still, how — oh how could a girl — how could anybody change their mind so suddenly!

But that was because he did not know women. Particularly women of the world.

Later Tod indeed felt like an odd fellow. Under different circumstances that ride to and along the luminous Wilshire Boulevard would have been an enjoyable one. The route was new to him. The sky arched, star-strewn,

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cloudless and unusually clear, over an atmosphere that was neither too chilly nor too stuffy to be invigorating. But the fact still remained, indomitable, that he was the sole occupant of the rumble seat in the car of the fellow whom he had even been reluctant to meet.

And she — the ardent glory of whose nearness he had known—the lovely girlish figure who had on previous occasions yielded her charms to his own embrace — was scarcely three feet away from him right now; and yet, somehow, it seemed that they were worlds apart. Once he had believed that he held first place in her heart. But now —literally—how surely he was being forced to take the back seat. As at times the girl's soft lilting laughter would register on his drums, or, when Cula's seat-mate would lean over suspiciously close to her and talk in hushed and husky tones one might assume that even one of Tod's breeding would not be immune from jealousy, toward the driver, and something akin to dislike. Nor had he as yet afforded a single thought for the luckless female who would very shortly accompany him.

Their ride terminated before a magnificent home in a district remote enough from all business centers to afford it grace, still not inconveniently distant, considering that its owner had not yet retired from business activities. The little red roadster turned in and whirred up the driveway. And, in the next few minutes Tod's immaculately dressed rival was introducing him to a party whom he had met formerly and rather informally—a female he was destined

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to remember thereafter, vividly; it was the slight of build, brazen-faced blonde, of the "pickups."

"Holy cow!" blurted Tod, under his breath in blank surprise.

"What did you call me?"

"Oh, I—" he stammered his chagrin, after the first shock had subsided.

"Fancy meeting you here." The girl had been informed that her partner was to be one not of the city, but of course she had no way of knowing it would be him of her recent venture.

"Ah-ha, they seem to have met before."

Gala stared thoughtfully.

"Yes, Freddie," rejoined she, "they seem to have met—before."

"All I can say is—it serves you right." Once they were in the rumble seat together, this is how Tod's companion thought to "break the ice." Since no answer seemed forthcoming she followed it up with "Just what you get for being too choosy."

Still no answer. Tod looked preoccupied, grim.

"Well!" she said over a tilted chin. "It's a ga-rand night for lovers, isn't it—Galahad?"

The answer came delinquently, abstractedly. "It would be for *lovers*." Tod rolled a glance of resentment at the driver, inwardly thinking that the evening might have been a lot "grander" for him. "At least there's two parties present who seem to be enjoying it."

Already they were slowing to their destination. Already other cars occupied the curb fronting the home where the party was to be held. Powerful lawn lights together with the light from an expansive front window flooded the place with illumination, displaying its rustic splendor. The foreground boasted of at least a dozen stately and well-matured palms; some of which lined, on either side, the cobblestone walk meandering over a vast lawn to a spacious porch. The lawn, elevated, was well terraced. Flowers adorned it on every side. Flowers—many of them imported. Flowers of perhaps ten thousand different luxuriant varieties! A lovely garden and a grove of firs came into being as they progressed along the walk, approaching the house. Tod, for one, fairly assimilated the beauty of it all.

At close view the house, although it was located in an aristocratic and very fashionable section of Wilshire district, was not at all of modern design. It was an olden predepression if not pre-boom-time model. Built by one of another generation, with respect for durability and quietude as well as beauty. Moreover, the old lapboard manor reared from a goodly cobblestone foundation to a full two-story height of majestic stateliness. Its hipped roof, windowed dormers, fancy rosette trimmings, and far-overhanging eaves gave it an air of comfort and calm. In fact, the place as a whole so contrasted its surrounding modernistic neighbors that it seemed to cry out the challenge—"You may be a newer but you're not a truer creation and I still retain my self-respect."

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"Looks like the old heap needs jazzing up a bit." It was Freddie who advanced this remark. And it inspired in Tod a queer feeling of apprehension, of unreassuring spiritual unrest. Something not unlike the impression that he had received upon entering Mrs. Black's home that first time. To Tod it seemed like sacrilege to do what Freddie's words implied: to encroach upon the dignity and tranquility of this old manor — whose master was perhaps sleeping the peaceful sleep of the dead — with hilarity, boisterous talk and lusty laughter, if not worse.

It developed, too, that Tod's suspicions were quite well grounded. Grew and grew the line of motor cars at the curb. Inside, the big old house with its maple floors, oak-paneled rooms and French-like furniture was full to its lower capacity. Full of breezy romping playboys and girls. Lilting music and lusty laughter!

And but rarely was the presence of the mountain-raised youth observed. His quiet remarks were seldom heard. The modest gallantry which he showed toward the softer sex passed unacknowledged, unappreciated. Among that giggling, babbling bedlam only one — his blondish partner — bent eyes of favor upon him. Cula paid him scant attention. And the only corner where he could go to catch a breath of untainted atmosphere was — out. In the garden.

Of course if he "hadn't been so tame," was the way that his companion later put it, Tod might have been noticed to the extent of popularity. Attired in the smart suit of urban pattern, which he had purchased especially for the occasion, his tall, lithe, well-proportioned form was sur-

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prisingly handsome. As a matter of plain fact he fitted and appeared better in city clothes than in flimsy formless rural garb, owing to his stately build. Yet what mattered that? The one pair of eyes in all that crowd that he really cared about seemed far from being captivated. Worse still, out under the moon-filtered shadows of said garden nook, his hair was, just now, being ruffled—by the wrong woman.

"Gee, kid! You've got a mop of permanent wavelets," the subtle blonde was telling him, as she combed her fingers none too gently through his hair. "I'd give *plenty* for a crop like that."

But Tod, his shoulders drooping, was idly extracting the petals from a withered geranium, while, unappreciatively, his restless toes were tapping to the tune of the music inside. He was thinking of another who had once said something quite similar to that.

"Hey Mex, you and your spouse don't seem to go for us in a big way."

"Spouse? Hell! I'm anything but." It was Tod's companion who snapped up the affirmative, and she further flayed the intruder with "He's 'bout as cold toward me as you are. Besides, magnetic little man, who dances with who—when?"

Tod guessed that Freddie, his rival, had occasioned just such an encounter. Intentionally. But evidently had gotten more than he had bargained for, since he, at her words, seemed to blush to the very roots of his "charley."

"It's open house inside," the latter evaded, dryly. "Bet-

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ter bring your iceman and come on in. Perhaps some liquid fire will lend you both a bit of fervor."

The night flared on, the party ever mounting. House-warming! Small need was there for incandescent globes, conductors of electricity and dynamic current here. Was there not enough human amplification—tobacco torches, firewater, passionate love-making, jealousy, hatred, fickle infatuation crackling—to light the entire premises? Or—burn the madhouse down!

The orchestra transgressed from "Continental" to "Betsey Couldn't Help It." This isn't a dance, considered Tod, as they again mingled in the affray. This was more like a free-for-all or a wrestling match. Where he came from folks danced with their feet. It required some ankling to do those old-time square dances, two-steps and quadrilles.

Then his thoughts were further repulsed by the clinking of glasses, close to his ear. "Here, boy friend, have a snort!"

Tod wrenched his gaze from the captivating figure who was just now swaying, "tango-tetched," beneath the body of her flaming escort.

"No. Thanks," he told his companion, whose hand was proffering the glass of rum.

"What! Don't like Scotch-and-soda?"

"Nope—strictly temperate."

"Well, good gad, fella! Why come to *this* party, then?"

"Shucks, I've asked *myself* that, at least a dozen times.

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Mostly out of curiosity I suppose. Or else maybe it's because I didn't like to be unsociable."

She extended the glass to his face. "There's only one way to be sociable, here."

Quietly Tod took the glass from her hand and set it aside. "Gosh. That stuff isn't even healthy."

"Healthy! Ah, who wants to be healthy anyhow?" She quickly caught up the glass and guzzled its contents, then followed it up with a drink from her own. "Being temperate in this day would be like asking a poor fish to—flip out of its environment to take a sun bath—and be lonely. While all its little fellow fishes glide and frolic here and there, even though the water's murky." She brought her imaginary fish into being by suddenly flipping her thumb out of a tightly clenched fist and then doing dizzy little motions in the air—close to Tod's nose—with the flat of her hand. "Mur-r-ky waters! Mur-ky l-liquid—thash it—thash my dish!" Her voice sounded queer, and, much to his disgust, Tod surmised that already she was "liquored tight." He piloted her to a seat, after which he once more became utterly oblivious to her presence, for a time at least. Even though she kept hissing some sort of complaint about him not dancing with her.

Cula and Freddie were still pretending to dance.

Tod rose presently and stood staring out of the window. The stars were veiled behind a heavy mist. The pall that hung between him and Cula seemed to thicken.

Back of him now . . . he caught snatches of conversation. More than once his name was mentioned, uncomplimen-

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tary: "Cula's mountain man is a dull soul, isn't he?" or "He's a queer duck. Regular incarnation of the legendary Great Stone Face!"

Tod smiled grimly, muttering, "They're not queer—not *very!*"

All at once a strange feeling waved over him. Something like the feeling of eyes upon him. And he looked back at the whirling swaying "mob" just in time to see Cula flick her eyes from his direction, as though she had been caught secretly scanning him. Was she spurning him?

And then, for some unforeseen reason, while Tod looked after her, the girl suddenly decided to become the center focus of attraction, for all.

"Freddie, do you remember the last time I wore this outfit to a party?"

"Oh—carmine's a hot color all right. Fast moving!"

"Right." She cocked a reddish tam jauntily over one ear and one eye.

Tod, sitting once more at his table, watched them.

All in one movement, Freddie suddenly caught her around the waist and swept her up onto a table. "Wail out something peppy. Hot!" he called to the wielder of the "sax," who in turn echoed his call with "There'll be a hot time in the old *house* tonight," then played it.

Already a group had circled the table.

In the center of it, glossy head gleaming, Cula began to dance. And—dance! . . . Far into the wee hours of the morning.

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Tod stared his disgust. Here was a different Cula. New, glamorous Cula. Strange! Vivacious and still charming, yet—different. Less lovable. *Changed!*

Or, had she changed? . . . Then all at once it came over him — had she not always been worldly — extremely, ingloriously so? No! Not Cula! In his heart he fain would disbelieve what appeared so obvious; but common sense—reason argued otherwise. This was Cula's world. That anyone could be content with life as he found it here, seemed incredible to one of Tod's breeding. But, he considered, Freddie would. Cula could! After all, owing to her so-different heritage, she could never be content to live in his world . . . in little old-fashioned Garvina.

By this time all present had gathered around her table. Freddie proposed a toast:

"Folks — let's drink to the health of one who has returned to her pals her dearest self again . . . here's to a most popular one—a social leader of our set—Cula Payne. Young. Gay. Charming!"

The glasses having been passed around, every person present drank to the last drop — all except one. Tod Speckles' drink hung listlessly at his side, untouched.

"We-l-l—ainsha gonna drink it?" His tormentress had gained a position at his side again, bent on forcing the issue. Half drunk and wholly shameless with surprising abruptness she grasped the hand that held his undrained glass. Elevating it, she babbled loud enough for all to hear: "Folks—behol' misser temper'nce . . . in pur-son! Why shouldn't he drink—to the gir-l he's in l-ove with?"

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A lusty laugh went up from the crowd, followed by clamorous jeers.

Tod jerked his arm free. For a tragic moment he saw only the sea of faces turned upon him . . . sneering faces. Leering eyes. Next his eyes caught and held the rank red rum in the glass before him. . . . If ever in his life he needed a bracer, it was now. If rum would quell that terrible ache in his breast — he was almost tempted to indulge. He raised the glass to level with his eyes . . . then drank not . . . the smiling dear face of his mother floated there . . . in the russet-red liquid!

"Gwan—drink it!"

Instead, Tod thumped the glass down upon the table, inwardly vehement. Aloud he said—and not without directness—"No. Think I'm a carnivorous monster?"

The "mob" roared ingloriously.

Then silvery lights grew dim. The music melted into soft, low passionate strains. Hush. Languor.

Once more Cula was in Freddie's embrace. Only now it was different. If Tod had intended asking her to try a dance with him, the idea, now, was forever chilled: Joggle of bodies, reek of rum, perfume, tobacco smoke and whisky . . . until the very walls must have been repulsed. . . . Passionate music! Sizzling humanity!

Then it was that his blonde partner—that willowy wisp of a girl essayed to "make her man." Leaving Cula and Freddie with whom she had just now been exchanging confidences, she slithered over to Tod, murmured an uncertain something; and then, like a subtle lissome specter

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she seemed to climb into his arms and twine her slender limbs about him all at the same time.

To say that Tod put her from him, would be putting it much too mildly. And, when she again brought about a scene with her jeering foul-mouthed protests, amid the jeers and sneers of the "mob," Cula occasioned "What's the matter, Tod? Can't you take it?"

Tod stared at her blankly. Unbelievingly. There was no reply.

"Don't you like your partner? Just what," she urged, "do you find wrong with her?"

"Just that she's *typical*." If these words effected Cula she made no outward show of it.

"Ah, come on. Don't be sillish, Tod. Join in. Get the hayseed out of your kinky wavelets. Here we have glamour, hot romance—life. Take a look around and wise yourself—see the difference in your world and mine."

Tod had been doing just that, avidly.

Before the youth (whose only offense toward them was a modest attitude) could make further reply, Freddie piped up with "Ah! It's against his principles. His people are all that way—too pious. If they don't quit being so goody-goody, like the city of Enoch, their little Garvina settlement will soon be going up."

This remark with the smart grimace that followed it caused another outburst of inglorious laughter.

Bolstered thus, by his playmates, the dapper little "dude" now took it upon himself to denounce the mountain youth.

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"Listen, hick, besides being a total kill-joy, you're a sap and a social dub. As a fun-mate—you're positively nil!"

And then it was that Tod stood up and faced them. In his great blue eyes beamed a light of virtue, of faith and fervor that was backed and bolstered by several generations of sturdy ancestors. The pose of him was supreme. Positive. *Compelling!* Then he spoke, in moderate tones yet with complete conviction:

"If, to be a good sport, one must be a *low, rotten, rum-soaked Sabbath-breaker*—then I prefer to be a dub!"

Turning to his undesirable partner of the evening, next he said, "Sister, if you expect *me* to take you home—come now."

Somewhat sobered by his rebuke, she stammered, "Well, since you're so masterful, I don't care if I *do*."

"Utsnay!" piped someone.

Nevertheless, thereafter, the party seemed to have lost its verve. And after Tod's departure, it was a noteworthy fact that more than one couple got up, cloaked themselves and followed suit.

Approximately one hour later in a strange bed in the dingy room of a cheap hotel on the east side of "downtown Los Angeles" the youth of the mountain sod verily wooed oblivion.

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TOD'S heavy eyelids opened on a grim gray Sabbath dawn. All, at first, was vague; his mind did not at first awaken to realities. Wonderingly, without moving, he blinked his eyes. Where was he? What had happened? Something ominous and unreassuring had happened during the night and he felt that he would never be himself again. He was obsessed with an incomprehensible loss. Apprehension shivered him. . . .

But he could not evade reality. Recollection shot a pang as of cupid's arrow straight through his heart! Sufficient of itself was the smelly grimy quilt beneath his nose to bring back remembrance—memories and vivid pictures of the past that fain would he forget. He not only was sleeping in a different bed in a strange and different place, but he never expected to see that other place again. Most appalling was it to be without hope of ever again seeing the girl herself. His mind reviewing all the black spots of the previous evening, he still pondered the behavior of her. . . . Little Cula! with velvety eyes, beautiful, sweet. He sobbed inwardly. Even now it was hard for him to believe that she was that kind—that she was not meant for him. Tod's

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tear-moistened eyes traced the scalloped and intricate stains on the rain-soaked ceiling above. Now he groaned outright from the sheer loss of it all, the pity of it—the inexplicable fallacy of the same.

Also there had been that about the affair too base, too subtle and obscene for his modesty to divine. It had nothing in common with that finer strain in him, an inviolable characteristic inherited from his mother and developed through the teachings inculcated in the faith of his fathers. Tod recalled the occasion when the seductive blonde pickup had first tried to proposition him. Then shuddered to think of Cula's association with her subsequently! It all seemed incredible, unbelievable! Tod's righteous convictions morally and spiritually had kept him aloof from any and all such baseness. Yet, sadly enough, one fair member of that worldly faction had brought about his final undoing.

With a shudder as from an all-pervading chill, Tod threw back the covers and got up, anxious to leave that scummy place.

Slowly, mechanically he clomp-clomped his descent of the rickety old stairway. All the fight seemed to have gone out of him. And his mental torment was no whit mitigated by what he experienced the instant he stepped out on the public walk; for, lo—by some vaguery of chance or fate in the form of a taxi he had been carried back to Fifth Street, and was moving once again along that same scummy route. In his dejection a few hours previous he had instructed his cab driver to take him somewhere, "anyplace where he

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could rent a cheap room." Well, most certainly his instructions had been carried out to the letter—if not to a lousy bed.

And so it seemed to the disconsolate Tod, as he wove his way through groups of loitering bums, past leering, swaggering drunks, that he had drifted still farther down the stream of uncertainty and doubt. Like so many others he had been swept back to this sordid bayou which environed the slave market. Not in quest of a livelihood—but because the very waters of his life seemed to be at such a low ebb that it just didn't seem worthwhile to launch his craft and resume life's voyage. Nor strive to ford the troubled stream!

Thus it came about that Tod felt dying in him his serene, instinctive self. It was with bitterness that he faced this growing realization. It seemed that he could only now resign himself to formidable fate. If fate it was. All the joys of life—all of life's enchantments—all his dreams—all his ideals, however high and holy, now, seemed somehow failing in this cold grim morning of realities.

Quite like an automaton he moved up and down and along the streets of that great metropolis for several days, finding solace in nothing. An all-pervading loneliness he knew. People—people—a wilderness of people! Yet none that he could really talk to, counsel with, or in whom he felt to confide. At most every busy corner news-criers would impudently thrust their papers into his face—"Another world war pending!" "Read all about it." War—

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war—conflict! What cared he? Surely there was a world of conflict in his soul. Tod frequented the general library. He even purchased several of his long-dreamed-of books, yet even in these he failed to find consolation.

That romance with Cula Payne was definitely over seemed a fact unquestionable. In addition to his prior state of mental wretchedness, this last bitter blow did in no wise leave him a pleasant outlook. He tried to reason away forever the so-poignant ache in his heart by telling himself again and again that it had been foolhardy to ever have let himself think for one moment that he could mean anything to a girl whose world was so formidably different from his. Still, the thought was unreasoning, almost unendurable! And in the end he was forced to admit that not only had he dared dream of a union between them, but also he had harbored hope of her conversion to his faith, without which it would be against his creed and code of principles to marry her. Still, too, he pondered her sudden change of heart . . . Yet the fact was imponderable. Inconceivable. How unsupportable! Why had such a thing happened to him?

As he sat this day in a reading room amid the library's crowding patrons, Tod Speckles felt to question the severity of judgment which had been meted out to him. Was he not innocent of offense toward any man? Was he not worthy of better breaks from life, particularly in consideration of his present status? Yet, as the youth sat there in that panorama of bookshelves and book lovers, his head bowed, his unseeing eyes staring at the pages of an open

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book, one would scarcely surmise but that he, too, was interestedly reading. Little did they dream that he was desperately importuning Deity for enlightenment; that in his wretchedness, helpless, hapless, heartsick, lonely, he felt like some wounded and bleeding creature of the wild who wanted to seek out some remote covert — to crawl away and die . . . Why not? He could return to the desert . . . And yet, should he, should anyone annihilate himself from all human kind, like Tony was doing? . . . Not indefinitely. Nor waste away his days in uselessness. Also himself . . . had he not already run from life unforgivably? And, as he looked deep into the very precincts of his soul, Tod was forced to admit to his realest truest self that he had not been steadfast in his convictions, respecting faith, of late. Steadfast? How could anyone remain unmoved? Against such formidable odds . . . with such a gloomy outlook . . . with loss of home and friends and love— Oh Elohim! . . .

No use. Even God from his plagued atmosphere was gone. And why not? In his selfish, thoughtless willfulness surely he had drifted unredeemably into by and forbidden channels. Why, then, in face of such digression, should he expect divine guidance to steer him back to that straightly flowing stream of happiness and hope, merely for the asking? Besides, it was growing stuffy in here. Terribly!

With desperate yet decisive abruptness Tod thrust both book and chair aside. "It's no use!" he muttered again as he made his way unspiritedly out of the building.

Yet in his dejection, the disconsolate youth had waxed

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oblivious to the fact that always it is most difficult for one to exercise trust while in the shadowy hour of his sorest needs. He was unmindful of many and invaluable gems of truth proffered him from childhood, one and not the least of which acclaimed that Deity works on wondrous yet albeit practical principles. Stuffy? Ah — blindness of youth! Were it not always stuffy — in any atmosphere where God seemed far away? Further, in his inertia, in his wretched state of mind how was the young man to know that even now He, from His celestial Semaphore, was shining forth beams of living light to guide aright his footsteps.

So then was it alone, alluringly, the fact that Tod recalled bits of Tony's philosophy concerning the desert which caused him just now to direct his steps toward a park where he could be out in the open? Where he could think more clearly? Correctly? Many blocks in a southeasterly direction he walked before he became conscious of fatigue. On Maple Avenue he boarded the "H" car which he remembered would take him within a few blocks of South Park. He settled himself on one of the high-backed hardwood seats rearward, glad to ride and rest awhile. His mind, however, did not, could not rest. The yellow trolley rocked and gonged and clattered its way, traveling at its usual midday (unhurried) rate of speed through an altogether unsightly section of the city while the youth sat in thoughtful somberness, unnoticed by the few passengers ahead.

Tod had often pondered the, what he considered, theo-

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retical statements he had heard about people becoming insane because of their inability to rid their minds of some incessantly-thought-provoking subject, but not until now did he experience — poignantly — that which made him wonder if such theory was not, after all, well grounded. His mental machinery had revolved round and round the same unpleasant thoughts until his head felt exceedingly heavy, his eyes dull and aching, his brain numb. So distraught was he that he read and reread every showy and exaggerative advertisement that met his eyes without becoming either stirred or distressed, any more than what he already was. And, so desperate was he for diversion that he now found himself wishing that he had brought along something to read. Read? Something to read . . . Glory be—his letter—from home.

He sat suddenly bolt upright and went fumblingly through his pockets. In his distraction he had forgotten completely the thick letter from home that he had barely opened. His anxious fingers felt . . . found it presently.

Upon opening the envelope, he drew Aunt Wealthy's letter first. He unfolded the single sheet of paper almost as eagerly as he would open one from his own parent, his heart warming to his great dear friend as he fairly assimilated:

Dear Tod:

Of course I felt bad that you left without coming to see your old Auntie, but you are long since forgiven. Don't you worry my crop of your kinky hair out about

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that. Here's something more important to bother your dear young head about—Bishop Weston is camping on your trail.

But don't be too much alarmed, not even when I tell you he is in California right now. Wanting to see you. For, to be honest with you, he is not exactly pursuing you. I think his main object for going to Los Angeles was to attend a general conference. But he expressed an earnest desire to see you. Said you could get in touch with him at the mission headquarters any time within the next two weeks (providing he don't see you first).

Now, Tod, my boy, without mincing matters, I must tell you that your sudden disappearance created quite a disturbance in the community, especially since the Bishop's safe had been opened. But no one is going to berate you too outrageously. You can trust Aunt Wealthy for that. But, if you want your old Auntie's opinion—you had better hustle along home. Tod, what we need most is some clue, some bit of positive proof that Dunc is at the bottom of all this deviltry. I think the Bishop surmises he is the guilty one, too. But naturally he'll give Duncan the benefit of the doubt. Well, I must close for this time. I might want you to read more of my letters later.

Sincerely as ever,
Your friend,
Aunt Wealthy

P. S. I still think I'm man enough to box your ears if you don't write to me *soon*.

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His eyes all moist, Tod refolded the stirring note and put it back into the envelope. He had scarcely finished doing so when he arrived at his destination. So the other letter would of necessity have to wait until he could walk over from the car stop to the park.

In these broad acres of living green, where rested also a goodly number of shrub-and-tree-sheltered nooks, it did not take the youth long to find a cozy luxuriant spot where he might conjecture, undisturbed.

The second letter, needless to say, was a long love message from his beloved mother. In closing, she bade him write soon and "please, son, hurry home to your old mom who will never cease loving you and praying for your welfare." There was also a postscript in this letter, that was written with well-meant desire, to console a wandering son.

It, at first, wrought contrary effect upon its hapless recipient, however. For, even as a mere taste of rich rare food will serve to whet and sharpen the appetite of one who is starving; likewise the youth only hungered more keenly after having tasted once again, as it were, the fruits of, and having dwelt momentarily in the atmosphere of his mountain home, inured by the sentiment of both those letters from his loved ones.

This, in addition to his already poignant state of longing, was disquieting to say the least. And whenever Tod reminded himself that even though he chose to return home

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he would never see her, the girl of his castle in the clouds, again, his yearning became acute.

Tod sighed weightily and flung himself full length upon the grass; and it was the sigh of a wretched soul who feels himself slipping over the brink of hopelessness into a pit of despair, a sigh fraught with self-deprecation and faltering faith and waning love and loneliness and dread. For the first time in his life he felt to question the divinity of his principles—*the* principles—inculcated in the faith of his fathers. Why be true to his heritage? What had life to offer him? Now? Perhaps, after all, it were better to have sowed some "wild oats" of worldliness. Had he been a bit more worldly-wise, likely as not he would still be in possession—in his golden dream-castle with the girl. Perhaps. If he had been more like Freddie and the others. . . . Freddie had said that he was "too pious, a social dub." Mrs. Black had fairly outdone herself trying to show him that he was "behind the times." Behind the times—a kill-joy, that was it. That's what he was! . . .

Thus, in his moment of bitter soliloquy, the adversaries of his soul strove to disrupt his truer self.

And yet, ruminated he, what of Tony's experience? Hadn't his odd old friend of the desert tried to warn him, to fortify him against this very thing. Once again it came dinging back to him: "modern madness," Tony's pet words. True enough, it seemed, there was no longer any place in the world for a quiet, unassuming dreamer such as he. In a modern sense, a fellow must be up-to-date and follow the gait—or else. What need was there for senti-

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ment in literature or anything else in such a modernistic world. Whosoever would write for any purpose other than for profit would be considered foolish, behind-the-times and "dumb." There was no longer any place for sincerity, fidelity and old-fashioned truth. Everything must be new, up-to-the-minute—different. And to abide the golden rule would only be exercising poor business policy.

Tod raised half-heartedly to a sitting position and cradled his face in his arms. Hopes blasted! Dreams blanched!

But then, Tod consoled himself in a measure with this thought, that at least Deity was "the same yesterday, today and forever." Yet found himself wondering, presently, if this glamorous, up-to-the-minute age didn't also desire a new and different God. He could understand now—small wonder Cula had asked if he were "content to remain in so small a place always." He and his people were considered old-fashioned and behind-the-times—all because they still believed in the old-fashioned, albeit, Christlike principles of truth.

Tod sighed again, long and deep. He buried his head still deeper in his arms. Well, at least he still had his memories, reflections of things as he had once dared dream they might be, as, moreover, for a short time he had enjoyed them. They could never rob him of his pleasurable past. Those days! of yesteryear. Then it was that he lived again those days in little old Garvina, when he and Cula had rollicked, hand in hand, together, over meadow and hill and dell. Tod leaned back dreamily and rested his

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back against the trunk of a gorgeous tree. *Their Gala Days* — when he and she of his cloud-castle had ridden and roamed and laughed together without a care in the world!

Perhaps it was the balmy zephyrs which were fanning his face from time to time; or the soothing sunshine; or, perhaps, the glory of the summer sky—that wafted him back in pleasant mental retrospect: to live over and over again those happy hours with just he and she in that wonderworld of mountain grandeur, of wild flowers and of mountain streamlets where, as he recalled, they had mingled their laughter with the low sweet musical laughter of some mountain brooklet, with the minnows gliding here and there beneath the silvery surface of the amber stream.

A brilliant-hued butterfly drifted near on silent wing. Somewhere, in the manifold branches overhead, gay feathery creatures twittered cheerily. Sweet feathered fairies of the air! Their silvery liquid melody seemed to soothe his sodden soul, while the youth continued to dream, to ponder and listen to voices which, if not whisperless, were vague and indistinct. To have had such magic only to lose it—for always! And why? Aw why—

S-s-cur-r-r-r-eet!

Almost as though it were providentially timed—as if to answer the query of a despairing soul; with startling abruptness a smart-looking roadster wheeled off Avalon—rubber skidding, metal shrieking—to head along the side street . . . heading uncertainly in Tod's direction.

"Dang fools! Must be drunk or crazy," Tod said of the occupants, as he watched the car come slithering on, its

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speed gradually mounting. But as it drew near he could see that the male driver only was bent upon making a spectacle, if not a corpse, of himself. Tod caught snatches of provocation from the girl companion as the machine roared past: "Cut it . . . crazy fool . . . flirtin' with . . . undertaker." But the man only drove more recklessly still, swerving from one side of the street to the other, barely missing the curb at almost every weave; the while he mingled his slushy inglorious guffawing with the girl's now frantic pleas.

That car . . . didn't he know that red roadster?

And suddenly Tod's own eyes widened, apprehensively. Another car — which evidently had rounded the corner sharply off San Pedro . . . was speeding toward the roadster! A faint screeching was heard as the driver of the latter grasped the situation and careened curbward. Yet to no avail. The roadster was caught in the movement of swaying to the same side.

Tod, breathlessly watching, gulped hard. They were going to crash. Head-on.

There was a ghastly metallic shriek. A heavy crashing thud!!! Followed by a final scraping sound, mingled with the squeal of rubber, wrench of metal and clink of glass.

Tod shuddered . . . got to his feet and started swiftly to run. He was the first to approach the demolished vehicles. The roadster being the smaller of the two cars had been dragged half way round and turned over on its side almost in the center of the street. The other machine having been jammed into the curb. When he reached the scene of the

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tragic mishap, save for an occasional sputter of escaping hot liquid against the still hotter manifold, death-certain silence, about the heap, reigned.

He rounded the roadster to find the driver of the second machine apparently unhurt — physically. But the fellow was floundering foolishly about, stilled speechless, yet jittery from the very suddenness of the crash rather than from any injury he had received.

Tod turned, now, back toward the over-turned roadster.

"Must've killed 'em when it smashed up like that," he said to an approaching robust policeman.

"Yeah. Hit head-on, eh?"

"Yes, sir." Nodding, Tod indicated the small car. "Struck the left front wheel of this one, swinging her sideways and over."

"So I see! What else do you know about it?"

"About all I saw," Tod was careful to say.

"Uh-huh. 'Bout what a blind man'd see."

With a suspicious look at the driver of the big car, the all-wise and unbending lawman sauntered around to the one-time driver's compartment of the demolished roadster.

Lying broadside, its top crumpled, one side caved in, its wheels splintered and its entire frame wrenched to distortion, the little roadster was a sad wreck indeed.

The first surprised shock having subsided, Tod ventured around closer to the driver's compartment where he could peer in through the shattered windshield at . . . the two battered and dishevelled bodies which lay there . . . Sprawled over the male driver was the slender form of a

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girl. A familiar looking . . . Great heavens—*the blonde pickup it was!*

Tod faltered in his forward movement.

"Well," he gulped, "she's thumbed her last ride."

Even as he recognized her the forlorn female stirred . . . groaned.

"Git back!" barked the cop, at the crowd of awesome onlookers who already were crowding up to the car in rapidly-gathering numbers. "The girl might come out of it. Give her a chance. Give her air, I say!"

By this time the unearthly shrieking of an ambulance could be heard . . . swiftly approaching.

"Let's get her out of here!"

As they fished her out of the broken, bloody mess the girl's face, haggled and pale as death, passed close to Tod's. The youth turned sick at the sight of it; but somehow it held him fascinated. Awe-struck. And strangely enough at that very instant the eyes opened . . . blinked in uncertainty . . . Then the lips moved, muttered: "So—it is you—misser temperance . . . Well—say it—I tol' ya so."

Instead, Tod, under his breath, said, "You poor wretch."

"Huh. Guess it's my—fu-nurl. You're—O—kay, kid—So lo—"

A lengthy awesome moment he looked after her before turning to the other victim. And if Tod had been puzzled concerning the little red roadster, there was no mistaking its ownership now; for, the driver—when they took stock of him—proved to be none other than Freddie—the ne'er-do-well. He lay crushed and blood-smeared where, by the

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merciless impact of metal and unyielding pavement, he had been dashed to his death.

It can readily be understood why the youth did not at once recognize them. For the top on the red racer was raised now where formerly it had been thrown back leaving the car open. But this sudden turn of events? Why were Freddie and the blonde together . . . here . . . like this? And what of Cula?

Tod, without speaking, watched them turn the body over . . . and, he would never forget the sight of that ghastly hideous face, with its eyes bulging in their sockets, the tongue protruding listlessly between grotesquely-parted lips.

Reek of rankest rum caused the officials to exchange singular glances.

Presently, once more could be heard that unearthly shrieking; while the crowd dispersed, the ambulance sped away, its weird siren gradually dying to soundlessness in the distance.

Shudderingly Tod looked after it. The loose-principled pair thus had met their tragic fate, and the luckless pickup would further pay for her loose conduct by waging her battle for life in the receiving hospital among strangers, where she would win or lose — alone. This, Tod's first time to look upon the cold still pallor of death, most certainly was a gruesome experience to say the least.

He swiveled his gaze, presently, back to the unsightly heap. Long after the main crowd had gone Tod stood staring down at the wreckage, thinking, thinking, review-

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ing the past. He rehearsed once more the incident of his first meeting with the pickups, the forever-to-be-remembered party at a subsequent date, and so on to the present.

And then—all so suddenly—like a ray of guiding light—it came to him. His answer! It were almost as if this demolished heap symbolized his life's wreckage. To the many people coming and going and passing about him on every side, this was only another traffic accident. But to the young man standing there, his head bared and slightly bowed, it was a revelation. It were as if the Almighty had piled up this wreckage immediately before him in order to show him how his entire future might be wrecked were he to follow the ways of the world. This, and countless other tragic ways, was the inevitable end of anyone who so chooses to follow the fickle, maddened, break-neck pace of a pleasure-crazed world. How could it be otherwise? Had not the girl, just now, mumblingly testified, in what was more than likely her dying testimony, that clean, moderate, upright living was best after all?

Consequently, even as he had felt a few moments ago that everything was wrong, so now he understood that all such were not willfully bad. Most everyone, deep down under that crust of modernism, experienced a certain restlessness, a soul-hunger for they knew not what, save it were a better, truer existence. But not many were brave enough to turn and swim against the tide of environment. The pull was too strong. Satanic designs in the guise of the world were too subtle and powerful.

With his eyes fixed on the once-sport-model roadster,

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Tod wondered, however, if crime, sin and tragedy would not greatly diminish if, in their desperate attempts to impress and influence youth, certain parents and Christians would spend less for smart, swiftly-moving means with which to pursue the ways of the world — frequent beer parlors, roadhouses, and other soul-contaminating vice dens, such as Tony had mentioned; and would spend more for clean, wholesome, recreative purposes — recreation halls and pleasure resorts where *good* music, *real* glamour and *lasting* pleasure in the proper environment, conducted under the proper management, could be enjoyed.

It is well, breathed Tod, that there be some to carry on, preserve and perpetuate the works and ideals of the old masters who once burned the midnight oil. Despite the speculative mandates of political parties and society who declare—"We want nothing more to do with the old ideals for they are too pious, trite and out-of-date," there must always be those who uphold right and honor and democracy. In spite of all the wills and wiles of a self-called civilized world that says: "You dare not promulgate these principles or you will become unpopular among the wise of the world," still, he considered, there must be those who continue to uphold truth, sincerity, fidelity, chastity and — temperance before our so-often misguided young folk, lest, indeed, democracy and Christianity "perish from the earth."

Thus it came about that Tod received providential answer to his importunity of earlier in the day, indelibly—oh so tragically, impressed upon his soul.

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In this connection he recalled the sentiment of his mother's letter. He searched out and unfolded the letter again, his eyes scanning its pages for the postscript. It read:

My boy, I wish to make you the same promise the prophet Jacob made his people—"Behold, I, Jacob, would speak unto you that are pure in heart. Look unto God with firmness of mind, and pray unto Him with exceeding faith, and He will console you in your afflictions and He will plead your cause and send down injustice upon those who seek your destruction."

It would seem almost as if retribution was already in process immediately upon his having desired to mend his way. Here was his answer augmented. Firmness of mind? Exceeding faith . . .

This was what his mother had tried to tell him all along. Despite any and *all* the distracting things in life he should remain true to his principles. But would he, could he in view of all his — ? Then a strong and uplifting power came over him. It stirred him, pulsed in his veins—his fathers had. He could! Why, was not that the very extraordinary thing about those sturdy pioneers . . . their outstanding faith, and stability . . . to stand by their principles, undaunted, despite all hazards, persecution, suffering? This virtue he knew had enabled his fathers to leave homes and loved ones to blaze a trail of blood and death and unutterable hardships across hundreds of miles of

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trackless wastes and build up an empire in a barren desert where they might live and propagate, unmolested, these very, soul-saving, peace-preserving, ideals. *That* had required implicit faith! Undying courage.

And that would be the glory of living—to remain true to such a heritage—to brave all the disturbing distracting things in life, ever trusting God for a final favorable outcome. That would be faith supreme. That, he felt, was or should be the pure essence of any and all religious creeds. And in this same light—mallet-like it struck him, too—the very letting down of this ideal had all but caused his own undoing. Such had been his bane—Cula had expected greater things of him. Aw, yes—that was it! And—he'd let her down . . . even as her father had. Hadn't he been an inspiration to the girl, only to disappoint her finally? Worse still, presumably, he had disillusioned her with respect to his people totally . . .

With this last thought, all the rich red blood of his youth seemed to leap in his veins at once. He felt the surge, the beat, the burn of it, and thrilled. He could scarcely keep back the tears of mingled shame and joy, reverence, determination and resolve. In this last radiant ray of living light he had gained the culmination of all his troubled thoughts . . . the affirmation . . . the assurance of his future conduct. He *would* be true to that inborn urge within him—he meant to make a comeback! Rather, he would *go back* home and face the music. He would work and study and fight! Never again would he doubt. And he would be patient, too. Above all else he meant to prove

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himself . . . to measure up to all that Cula Payne had once loved in him . . . even if she were forever lost to him . . . He was leaving for home—*now*. This time he was sure of it.

To this end he strode resolutely, not unhurriedly, away.

Retribution

SO FAR as actual literal haste was concerned, Tod returned to the little settlement, his home town in the mountains, in nearly the same manner that he had left it. Hurriedly. Once over the divide, however, before repairing to the little cottage by the creek, he was wont to tarry on the outskirts of town. Here, a spirit grappled with his finer emotions. Was it alone the fact that he looked once again upon familiar scenes of endearment which caused the heart-surfing commotion within his breast? Ah—no. It was not joyful anticipation that he experienced. The same piny tang was on the air. The same shallow glow of kerosene-lighted windows here and there marked the dwellings that slumbered there to the fore of him. Tod could name and number every one of them. Yet the atmosphere of the little old town seemed somehow strangely different. He sensed it. Or, was it the village that had changed? Perhaps it was that the will-o'-the-wisp, love, was still playing havoc with his heart. Love that had failed him! Was memory of it destined to beset him always?

Unaccountably Tod swung from saddle and freed his

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pinto horse (which he had sold at the junction where he had changed from horseback to railway transportation and then had repurchased on his return trip). Unaccountably he skirted the settlement afoot.

Already evening shadows had deepened into nightfall, and Tod observed that somber threatening clouds begloomed the horizon. The sky was moonless, star-strewn yet mystic. And by the time Tod—approaching the memorable spot where last he had gathered ground cherries—had reached the lower meadow, opaque darkness had swallowed him. How foolish of him to return to this spot the very first thing! It was so full of memories of her—of that other Cula Payne. Cula's lovable self! . . .

Reminiscent thoughts just now were repulsed by the rasping sound of a familiar voice which smote upon his drums. The youth drew back as from a plague . . . He bristled. Dunc's voice it was! Tod would know it anytime, anywhere. Harsh, cold, husky with passion, it was saying,

“At last I gotcha—where I wantcha.”

Tod had been following along the creek bed. Now he crouched low, under the overhanging willows which sheltered the embankment, keenly keyed to the moment. Strenuously listening . . .

And the next instant he heard that which set every fiber of his being a-tingle with apprehension. Cula Payne's answering voice! Cula? Here! . . . All in a flash it came to him, too—why Freddie had been with the pickup on the day of the crash. If Cula had walked out on him, Freddie

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had chosen this way to dissipate his anger, indignation and grief.

"Dunc Huff," she was telling him, "if I so much as feel the slightest touch of your filthy hands on me, you'll rue the act! I'll—"

"Har! Har! Har! You and who else?" Huff was gloating. "I gave ya fair warnin'. Hell-a-mighty, gal! Ever'-body knows what you've been to thet young striplin', Tod Speckles. Don't I know! You even follererd him out to the States. Shore. An' nobody but a lovesick gal would be out here, in the night like this—alone."

The scream that followed this remark was significant, and it sent Tod scrambling up the bank like one terrified by a phantom. How could any man be so vile?

"Hands off—Dunc Huff!"

The culprit whirled to face Tod. Huff's look was that of a mangy cur surprised at its pillage . . .

A terrible interval of silence! Wherein the very mountain peaks seemed brooding. The heavens scowled. Ruffled waters murmured. Wild life shrank for shame to its secret and hidden coverts.

Then Tod said coolly, "I'm here to make the girl's words good."

The first shock of surprise having passed, Huff was his usual swaggering self. Malignantly, venomously he returned: "What could *you* do — mama's little runaway man?" And there was in his tones the terrible intensity of his passion as terrible as the gathering fury of his hate, flooded by the desire to break out in destructive violence.

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He heaved the words like cannon balls. "You—you, with your pure thoughts, who stole the Bishop's affections from me—you, Tod Speckles, with your soft ways, nice words an' high ideals— D— your soft-hearted soul! I'll fix you now for good!"

Tod tensed. Like Tony had said—jealousy and envy in the form of Dunc had been the nigger in the woodpile all along . . . and evidently the Bishop had been holding out on him, wisely, secretly admiring Tod yet endeavoring to reform his charge. But Dunc guessed as much. In his moment of bitter outburst, that unworthy had let the truth leak out. And there was more if only it could be proven. Well, thought Tod, he needs the kind of reforming I'm going to give him—now. All the anguish, all the suffering that had been his during those past long terrible months, combined with righteous rage, now welled up in him and cried out for retribution.

"Dunc, you blustering blackguard! You adopted son of a saint yet lowest of gibbering devils!" His voice, low yet firm as steel, would have carried a warning to a more discerning person.

"Har! Har—"

Swift and silent as the last Mohican Tod rushed him. His fist shot out and up—making contact with the culprit's chin.

A terrible madness took possession of the latter. He hammered home a right-hander to Tod's head. The blow was terrific, The smaller youth went down . . .

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But Tod bounced to his feet again so quickly that he caught his opponent off guard.

A flurry of blows lifted the bully's face and sent him floundering to earth.

"Why you d— punk! I'll kill you for *thet*," Huff snarled, rising. He was bulky where Tod was thin. And was he not much more experienced at this sort of thing? Further, in school days, had it not been easy for him to maul this weakling—this poor, scrawny son of a widow woman?

As he made at Tod the second time there was heard a low rumble in the distance. A moan . . . a wail as of a doomed soul. Weird. Dismal. Unearthly!

The girl seemed to shrink into the shadows. Her wide frantic eyes searched the heavens.

In sort of a blind rage, Huff flung several hard blows at Tod's face. Tod sidestepped sprightly, letting them fall harmlessly over his shoulder, at the same time dealing a smart jab to his adversary's jaw. "I'm going to give you what you've needed for a long time, Dunc," he said evenly, not boastfully, yet with positive conviction. "And you're never going to bully me again."

Like an enraged beast Huff redoubled his efforts and came bellowing in. Yet with about the same results.

For Tod was sinewy, lithe and swift. He squared off to meet the onset. Always, in times past, owing to his idealistic temperament—his sympathetic interest in humanity, the youth had had his qualms when it came to fistic struggle. He knew, too, that it were "better to suffer

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wrong than do wrong." By this same token, always there had seemed all to lose and nothing to gain, since he, Tod, had never thirsted for any man's blood. But now—things were different. He realized that justice—right—honor were at stake! Nor was there any faltering in his manner now. Ducking . . . weaving . . . sidestepping, he evaded the brunt of those heavy blows, until, of a sudden, the other caught him with a stiff uppercut, knocking him down again. Albeit, the youth regained his feet and bounded back so quickly that his adversary stood gaping his amaze. Huff was thinking, uneasily, that his opponent should have been unconscious before now. Again he swung at Tod. Again he missed. He took a sharp blow in exchange. Another. And another that made his head ring! For a painful interval he did not retaliate. Nor was he wearing his insolent grin, now, as he shrank back to glare at his antagonist. It was incredible that Tod should fight so well. Incredible that merely being in the right could put such formidable powers into Tod Speckles' scrawny form, into his soft heart, his sympathetic soul! Rushing in with sudden vehemence he caught Tod off his guard and knocked him down again. Thereupon—like the coward that he was—he pounced upon the smaller man while he was down. With venomous ferocity he cuffed Tod, slugged him, he even stomped him . . .

While back in the hills that low moaning sound seemed to grow louder. A vicious gust swept over them, rustling the willows. Now jagged, forked flashes of celestial fire were streaking across the sky. Loud thunder claps fol-

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lowed. Rumbling died in the distance. The moaning assumed dominance, gradually swelling to a roar, now lulling . . . now rising. Unlike any that Tod had ever heard before at this time of the year, it had a strange affinity with the abyss of heaven. With increasing velocity then it rose and swelled to a deep roar, like the surging of a mighty storm through the forest. Great drops of rain began to pelt the tragic trio. Another mighty thunder crash and Huff seemed to lose some of his passion for brutality. He appeared to have the fear of God in him.

And somehow Tod managed to wriggle free again. He braced himself on widespread legs and jabbed methodically, dealing blow for blow. Then, suddenly—his fist shot out like a double-acting drill, all of its spring unleashed . . .

Caught squarely on his devilish chin, the bully blanched . . . staggered backward, stunned. For a brief interval he stood, wall-eyed, staring, as though his legs refused him action . . . Then he slumped, went down. And Tod received a surprise when he failed to rise again. Whether or not his adversary's head had struck a rock he would never know. But this he knew—he, Tod, had protected the virginity of the girl he loved!

Panting and breathless, he turned away, glad that he had chanced to come this way.

"Tod! Oh Tod . . ." Cula was sobbing at his elbow. Tender, passionate arms clung to him.

"Cula! It's *really* you!" His eyes were a miracle of tenderness . . . a moment as he held her close.

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"Oh Tod, I feared he would kill you!"

"Pshaw. I'm all right." Thunder broke on their ears, deafeningly. "But say—I've got to get you out of here, quick."

He nodded at Huff. "I'll do something about *you* later."

Rain had begun to pour in torrents now. Huge fast-falling drops spattered in the creek below. More fireworks . . . more thunder! It seemed that all the infernal fiends of hell had been arrayed against Tod, with surging blasting fury, for, seldom had the storm, at this season, assumed such cloudburst proportions.

But, so also were the more powerful forces of heaven set to action—bent on *retribution*.

"Tod—wait—" Something in the girl's voice caused the youth to hesitate. He turned to see her staring, eyes wide, at Huff's still form. "Look!" she cried, pointing.

Tod looked. And what he saw caused him to linger . . . There—on the upturned front of his adversary's shirt—by the light of an infinite flash—a dark dank splotch showed.

"Blood!" gasped the girl, horrified.

"No—wait . . ." Tod reached down and pressed the rain-soaked pocket with his fingertips. "It's something else. Paper—with indelible writing, it looks like." Then he felt inside, and, in that moment of taut suspense drew forth a splotched and rain-soaked envelope. Just why he was impressed to do so Tod could not be certain. "Must've had a hunch," he was later to remark.

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"Why, Tod—that's the envelope my money was in. My stolen bank notes!"

"Aw-huh." Quietly, yet with directness Tod replied, "Looks like the long-desired and very positive clue to Dunc's guilt."

Tod pocketed the envelope and led Cula away.

The next instant a loud crash from behind caused him to look back. Lightning, striking, had coiled a mammoth pine across the creek from the prostrate Huff. It sent the flayed bark and splinters flying. Thunder rolled.

"Too close for comfort," breathed Tod. And Cula felt his arm tighten around her waist.

In another lightning flash which followed, they saw the fallen one stir. Dunc sat up. Mopped an arm across his face. Got stumblingly to his feet.

And then—there followed still another—an exceedingly bright flare of celestial fire . . . Illuminating the entire earth and heavens, the jagged bolt seemed to pause in midair—directly over Huff's head . . . A blood-chilling wail as of a doomed soul rent the night. A scream as Dunc wilted! Blackness. Then all waxed infinitely still.

Love's Understanding

AFTER the storm!

Ground cherry season was late that year. But the rarity of it—the bright lustrous bloom of flower-land and the bountiful crop of luscious berries quite well compensated for its tardiness.

And, once again they were alone together—youthful lovers! Side by side, their arms entwined, lover-like they swung along through verdant field and gleaming meadow, approaching their favorite nook. His arm tightened about her waistline as Tod asserted, feelingly, "I'm sorry I've been so slow about some things."

Cula Payne laughed happily up into his wide blue eyes. "For instance?"

"Just for instance, a sample of Mom's ground cherry preserves I promised you—I haven't given you that treat, yet."

They, by this time, had reached the creek-bank with its overhanging willows, where grew also those great green vines.

The girl warbled softly to herself, at his egregious innocence—his unsuspecting mien. She thrilled to the secret

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of what she had in store for him. "Tod, dear, I'm a move ahead of you on that score also," she told him, when she could no longer suppress her exultation at the prospect in view.

"You—what? Say—" he dropped the vineful of opal-like berries he was rolling, and moved over very close to her. "Girl," he said, as of yesteryear, "*also* is certainly the word if you've already met mother. It strikes me you're full of surprises for me." His arm stole around her again. "Tell me all, Cu, dear. All the things I'm so anxious to hear. By what magic, *for instance*, did I find you here last night? I hardly dare believe it yet."

And Cula was gleefully thinking what an appropriate place and an opportune time for the—great "understanding." Seated as they were on the grassy bank overlooking the flower-strewn meadow; with the heavens, clear and blue—bluer than Bermuda waters and swimming in silvery sunshine—arching over them: With the mountains standing by in all their solemn silent grandeur—firm and steadfast and enduring! With ever the soft lulling murmur of the stream below.

"Oh, Tod," she presently trilled. "I'm so happy to say that I've known your mother a long, long while. And I've come back to her and to you and to me and all this beauty and happiness because—because we want me to!" She rolled her eyes intriguingly, color mounting in her cheeks.

"We? O—why, of course," Tod amended.

"I *mean*—love is a mutual thing, isn't it, dearie?"

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"Aw! But what—I mean how can I be sure you won't quit me again?"

"Don't be sillish, man of mine. You walked out on me first. Besides, stupid, couldn't you see that I was acting a part that night at the party? . . ." His face just now was an open book of bafflement. "No; you wouldn't," she said resignedly. "As a matter of fact, Tod, it was your old friend—my father—who willed it. He wanted to test your virtues, I suppose. I'm sure I didn't. I've believed in you from the first. Your sincerity, your—"

"Cula—girl! What is this you're saying? Do you mean the whole thing was a put-up job, against me? Was the party held especially to—"

"No, no. What you saw at the party that night was typical of that crowd. My part only was make believe. Even Freddie showed *me* his carnal self. HE was monstrous. Didn't think it was in him to be so jealous. And your blonde partner, of course, was a total stranger to me. Freddie picked her up somewhere. Said if there was any bad in you at all, she'd surely bring it out."

"Uh-huh. She was running true to form all right," rejoined Tod.

"Say! By the by, you seem to know plenty about her. Tell me—"

"Shucks—" Tod told Cula of the strange coincidence. Concerning this subject, he surmised that she was thinking also of a certain tragic ending, but neither had any desire to usher tragedy in upon the sublimity of the occasion. So, when he had explained how he'd first chanced to meet the

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pickups, abruptly he bent questioning eyes upon her. "You believe me?"

Her already-clinging arms only hugged him the tighter. "I'll always believe in you." And she meant it. For all along she had cherished the belief that if it should be her good fortune to win him—this youth with his lofty ideals, who was so positive in his convictions of right living; who spurned the very thought of death ever severing hallowed bonds of the celestial covenants, either parental or marital; whose religion also held that soulmates were foreordained for each other even before they left the spirit world—the devil and all his hellish henchmen could never come between her and such a man.

"You see—" there was sadness in her voice, though, as she resumed telling of her parent—"my father was not true to mother. His wild escapades, socially, broke her heart, killed mother finally."

"But Tony seems so—"

"I know," she quickly interposed. "He has long since repented and he's paying the price; but I've never quite forgiven him. Mother was so sweet, so noble and *so* dear to me. . . . Do you wonder, Tod, that I was anxious to shake my environment—that I was earnestly seeking a truer existence?"

"Cula—it's all so—so overwhelming. I can't hardly believe my ears."

She laughed teasingly, pertly tilting her chin. "You ain't heard nothin', yet. Sir! . . . If you doubt my sincerity —here. Accept my credentials." And forthwith she pro-

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duced from somewhere within the folds of her bosom a folded bit of paper.

Tod, still in puzzlement, scanned its writings. "Why, this is a certificate, of baptism!" he gasped.

"Yop," proudly. "I am, in full faith and fellowship, a Latter-day Saint, now. Did you suppose I was going to pass up the opportunity of being with my darling mother —forever, and ever?"

"Aw! Will wonders never cease! Cula, do you know what this means to me? Do you realize what a wonderful thing it is to—"

"To be together always!" she finished for him, snuggling her head against his shoulder. "Oh, Tod! I've always dreamed of such a love. I've never accepted the popular interpretation — that love is mere passion. Nor as some say — that love is a fancy. To me love is something real. Something sublimely big and grand and beautiful! And your religion, our religion portrays it even more wonderful — it's an eternal bond of companionship and devotion."

"All of which," returned Tod, his spirit soaring on little rifts of glory, "just about makes heaven on earth for me . . . Only for one thing, my happiness would be complete."

"Yes?"

"I feel so guilty about the way I've been wasting precious time. I've neglected my life's work."

"Oh, no; believe me, Tod Speckles, you've not—been wasting your time. Nor have you neglected your life's work. 'Example is always greater than precept,' you know.

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And you're a living oracle of all that's good and true. That's what the world needs — more people in it who practice the good things they teach. Here's a secret: Aunt Wealthy told me the Bishop has had his eye on you for some time. Better prepare yourself for promotion, young man. It was only that he was trying through patience to help Dunc. Poor Dunc, his kind are to be pitied."

"Still, there's my dreams," he murmured, wistfully. "I've wanted so much to refute Bane Gray's inglorious theorizing against my people. You see, Cu dear, more than most anything, I've wanted to work in that great cause—to help stem the viperous theorizing and worldly influences that are setting up the wrong ideals before our young folks; and, girl—I want to say to the young people—for there are many thousands of them who, like the unfortunate pickup, are restlessly looking to the wrong source for new thrills—that there is still such a thing as clean, wholesome, hearty fun-making — and that sincerity, chastity and temperance are *still* enduring facts." His voice trailed off regretfully. "But I've been so distraught of late—don't you see—so far I've failed utterly in my purpose."

"That's what *you* think, fella!"

Again that vein of mystery.

Tod looked at her questioningly. She appeared so divinely placid in her attitude, regarding his life's work. "What, girl—are you driving at?"

"That I still have a card up my sleeve. Look!"

And she meant it, literally. For even as she spoke she drew forth an article . . . it was a leaf of paper that had

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been torn from a recent and very prominent newspaper, and the article was headed:

"LIVING WITH A PURPOSE (THE TRUTH ABOUT THE MORMONS)"

The publication told all about the amazing revelation made by a youth who was very efficiently dislodging the criticisms of the noted writer, Bane Gray. And Tod Speckles was the name affixed as being the very brilliant-minded author of the same.

"If you hadn't been so preoccupied with worry and doubt, young man," Cula informed him, "you might have seen your articles all over the fronts of leading papers and periodicals while in Los Angeles. While I was there I ran weekly and monthly articles for you. Regularly. These in turn incited favorable comment all over the country."

"But I—Cula why—" Then Tod said, stammeringly, "I don't understand. You've been doing all this for me—while I've been floundering around? Cu, darling! Psh-aw. I don't deserve such a—a build-up."

"Listen. I'm going to be perfectly honest with you. When I first came up here, I'll admit that I was prejudiced. Life seemed to have given me such a raw deal. I had about concluded there were no more honorable, sincere people in the world. Every man I ever knew to any extent had disappointed me, from a moral standpoint. I, like yourself, once had lofty ideals. But it just seemed such a lone hard fight, without results. So I had more or less

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given up so far as usefulness was concerned. I decided to get mine the easy way—like so many others had. Dad, I knew, had popularized himself by writing against your people. And when I was told about this little community up here all by itself and was *misinformed* about their narrowness and *peculiarities*—well, I just considered *that* my cue. Frankly speaking, I came up here purposely to denounce your people and their customs and beliefs.

"Then—I met you." She sighed a rapturous little sigh. "And I couldn't, at first, believe it. I didn't think there was another man left in all this world—" she squeezed his arm, ardently—"like you! And oh—my dear, you are so great and good and true. You can be so tender, so deliciously modest. Then again, at the very right times—so masterful! You'll never know how proud of you I was—that night at the party. You rebuked them so superbly. The thing I admire most in you is that you are—so very firm in your spiritual and moral convictions!"

"Then you say that you don't deserve a build-up! Besides, don't you see, dear—your purpose is my purpose! Your life is my life. I gave *you* a build-up, eh? Why you gave *me* my very *purpose* in life," she said dreamily. "Something to live for!"

"And—I am not the only one in our family who idealizes you . . ."

She paused for response. But Tod was at the moment too full for utterance. His eyes kindled with adoration, he hugged her to his heart.

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Since no comment was forthcoming, the girl resumed: "Bane Gray is for you, too. One hundred per!"

"*Bane Gray!*" It was Tod's turn to gasp at the mention of that name. "Why, Cula—girl—what do you mean? I don't even know the man."

"Oh, yes you do. Quite well. For you see—Bane Gray is my father."

"Cu! dear! That couldn't be."

"But he is—really. Bane Gray is the name under which my father writes. His *nom de plume*."

"Why—then you—I mean—we can't—"

"Oh, yes we can. And we shall. As I say, he deserves to pay for his terrible mistakes. Anyway, he's a broken man already. He can't get over the way he wronged mother. His writings don't mean *that* much to him now." She flipped her finger. "Besides, he has expressed his sincere desire for you to unsay what he has said against the Latter-day Saints."

Tod was thinking—"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform!" Aloud he said, "But we must also forgive your father. That too—repentance and forgiveness are also principles of our belief."

"Perhaps I shall, sometime." She smiled. "*You* would look at it that way." Her pretty mouth curled in pouting appeal, while lilting velvety eyes dreamed up into his great wide blue ones. "Especially since you say so, honeydear," she whispered.

"Then that makes everything wonderfully, gloriously all right," he told her. "Especially since I love you so!"

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"Tod mine!" She crept into his arms. "Do you really, dear? *Really?*"

And the kiss that he gave her then was a lingering one. Uplifting. Unforgettable and sweet. . . .

And so, because they had come up through "the great tribulation," and had found the way to *real* joy and *lasting* happiness *Their* Gala Days were gala days indeed. And thereafter young love continued to ride the "high-hills."



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